ALL STAR ISSUE

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

MARCH 40¢

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ALFRED BESTER
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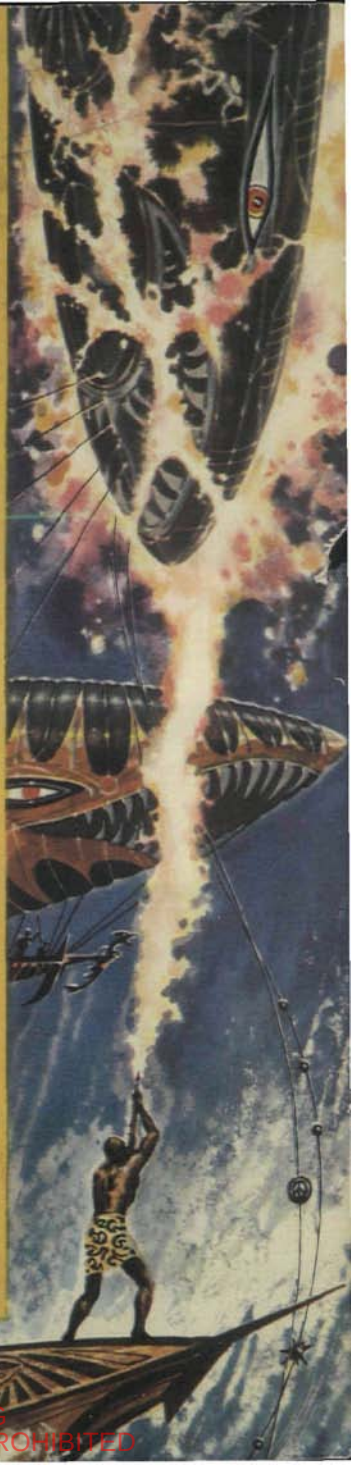

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 16, No. 3 MARCH

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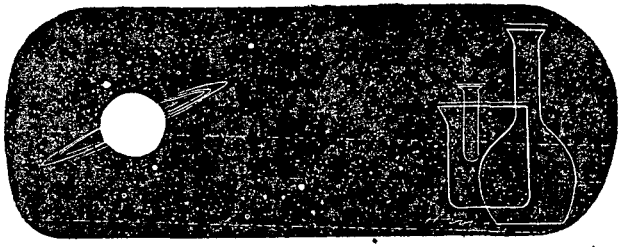
An Open Letter



Dear Reader:

Our price went up from 35¢ to 40¢ with our last issue; we think that this issue you are now holding in your hands is worth considerably more than 40¢, and hope you will agree. The rising costs which made it necessary for us to increase our price are apparent on all sides—the extra nickel we are asking for F&SF is nothing compared to the increase in the cost of movies and books in recent years. The books and movies are no better—F&SF, we hope, will be.

We cannot promise a star-packed issue such as this one every month, but we can promise a parcel of good reading. Next month, for instance, we have scheduled a fresh, compelling short novelet by a relative newcomer—*Flowers for Algernon*, by Daniel Keyes—as well as a powerful, important story by an old pro—*To See Another Mountain*, by Frederik Pohl. There will also be an assortment of fine shorter stories, plus Isaac Asimov on Science.

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This story begins calmly in 1917 with a quiet barroom discussion of the Unmarried Mother racket, and proceeds—with astonishing abruptness—backward, forward, and sidewise . . . in time, tempo, and tumultuousness. Or, as the Laws say . . . "A Paradox May Be Paradoctored."

"ALL YOU ZOMBIES —"

by Robert A. Heinlein

2217 Time Zone V (EST) 7 Nov 1970 NYC—"Pop's Place": I was polishing a brandy snifter when the Unmarried Mother came in. I noted the time—10:17 p.m. zone five, or eastern time, November 7th, 1970. Temporal agents always notice time & date; we must.

The Unmarried Mother was a man twenty-five years old, no taller than I am, childish features and a touchy temper. I didn't like his looks—I never had—but he was a lad I was here to recruit, he was my boy. I gave him my best barkeep's smile.

Maybe I'm too critical. He wasn't swish; his nickname came from what he always said when some nosy type asked him his line: "I'm an unmarried mother." If he felt less than murderous he would add: "—at four cents a word. I write confession stories."

If he felt nasty, he would wait for somebody to make something of it. He had a lethal style of infighting, like a female cop—one reason I wanted him. Not the only one.

He had a load on and his face showed that he despised people more than usual. Silently I poured a double shot of Old Underwear and left the bottle. He drank it, poured another.

I wiped the bar top. "How's the 'Unmarried Mother' racket?"

His fingers tightened on the glass and he seemed about to throw it at me; I felt for the sap under the bar. In temporal manipulation you try to figure everything, but there are so many factors that you never take needless risks.

I saw him relax that tiny amount they teach you to watch for in the Bureau's training school. "Sorry," I said. "Just asking,

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'How's business?' Make it 'How's the weather?' "

He looked sour. "Business is okay. I write 'em, they print 'em, I eat."

I poured myself one, leaned toward him. "Matter of fact," I said, "you write a nice stick—I've sampled a few. You have an amazingly sure touch with the woman's angle."

It was a slip I had to risk; he never admitted what pen-names he used. But he was boiled enough to pick up only the last: " 'Woman's angle!' " he repeated with a snort. "Yeah, I know the woman's angle. I should."

"So?" I said doubtfully. "Sisters?"

"No. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Now, now, "I answered mildly "bartenders and psychiatrists learn that nothing is stranger than truth. Why, son, if you heard the stories I do—well, you'd make yourself rich. Incredible."

"You don't know what 'incredible' means!"

"So? Nothing astonishes me. I've always heard worse."

He snorted again. "Want to bet the rest of the bottle?"

"I'll bet a full bottle." I placed one on the bar.

"Well—" I signaled my other bartender to handle the trade. We were at the far end, a single-stool space that I kept private by loading the bar top by it with jars of pickled eggs and other clutter. A few were at the other end watching the fights and somebody was playing the juke box—private as a bed where we were.

"Okay," he began, "to start with, I'm a bastard."

"No distinction around here," I said.

"I mean it," he snapped. "My parents weren't married."

"Still no distinction," I insisted. "Neither were mine."

"When—" He stopped, gave me the first warm look I ever saw on him. "You mean that?"

"I do. A one-hundred-percent bastard. "In fact," I added, "No one in my family ever marries. All bastards."

"Oh, that." I showed it to him. "It just looks like a wedding ring; I wear it to keep women off." It is an antique I bought in 1985 from a fellow operative—he had fetched it from pre-Christian Crete. "The Worm Ouroboros . . . the World Snake that eats its own tail, forever without end. A symbol of the Great Paradox."

He barely glanced at it. "If you're really a bastard, you know how it feels. When I was a little girl—"

"Wups!" I said. "Did I hear you correctly?"

"Who's telling this story? When I was a little girl— Look, ever hear of Christine Jorgenson? Or Roberta Cowell?"

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"Uh, sex-change cases? You're trying to tell me—"

"Don't interrupt or swelp me, I won't talk. I was a foundling, left at an orphanage in Cleveland in 1945 when I was a month old. When I was a little girl, I envied kids with parents. Then, when I learned about sex—and, believe me, Pop, you learn fast in an orphanage—"

"I know."

"—I made a solemn vow that any kid of mine would have both a pop and a mom. It kept me 'pure,' quite a feat in that vicinity —I had to learn to fight to manage it. Then I got older and realized I stood darn little chance of getting married—for the same reason I hadn't been adopted." He scowled. "I was horse-faced and buck-toothed, flat-chested and straight-haired."

"You don't look any worse than I do."

"Who cares how a barkeep looks? Or a writer? But people wanting to adopt pick little blue-eyed golden-haired morons. Later on, the boys want bulging breasts, a cute face, and an Oh-you-wonderful-male manner." He shugged. "I couldn't compete. So I decided to join the W.E.N.C.H.E.S."

"Eh?"

"Women's Emergency National Corps, Hospitality & Entertainment Section, what they now call 'Space Angels'—Auxiliary Nursing Group, Extraterrestrial Legions."

I knew both terms, once I had them chronized. We use still a third name, it's that elite military service corps: Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen. Vocabulary shift is the worst hurdle in time-jumps —did you know that "service station" once meant a dispensary for petroleum fractions? Once on an assignment in the Churchill Era, a woman said to me, "Meet me at the service station next door" —which is not what it sounds; a "service station" (then) wouldn't have a bed in it.

He went on: "It was when they first admitted you can't send men into space for months and years and not relieve the tension. You remember how the wowsers screamed? — that improved my chance since, volunteers were scarce. A gal had to be respectable, preferably virgin (they liked to train them from scratch), above average mentally, and stable emotionally. But most volunteers were old hookers, or neurotics who would crack up ten days off Earth. So I didn't need looks; if they accepted me, they would fix my buck teeth, put a wave in my hair, teach me to walk and dance and how to listen to a man pleasingly, and everything else—plus training for the prime duties. They would even use plastic surgery if it would help—nothing too good for Our Boys.

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"Best yet, they made sure you didn't get pregnant during your enlistment—and you were almost certain to marry at the end of your hitch. Same way today, A.N.G.E.L.S. marry spacers—they talk the language.

"When I was eighteen I was placed as a 'mother's helper.' This family simply wanted a cheap servant but I didn't mind as I couldn't enlist till I was twenty-one. I did housework and went to night school—pretending to continue my high school typing and shorthand but going to a charm class instead, to better my chances for enlistment.

"Then I met this city slicker with his hundred dollar bills." He scowled. "The no-good actually did have a wad of hundred-dollar bills. He showed me one night, told me to help myself.

"But I didn't. I liked him. He was the first man I ever met who was nice to me without trying games with me. I quit night school to see him oftener. It was the happiest time of my life."

"Then one night in the park the games began."

He stopped. I said, "And then?"

"And then *nothing!* I never saw him again. He walked me home and told me he loved me—and kissed me good-night and never came back." He looked grim. "If I could find him, I'd kill him!"

"Well," I sympathize, "I know how you feel. But killing him—just for doing what comes naturally—hmm . . . Did you struggle?"

"Huh? What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a bit. Maybe he deserves a couple of broken arms for running out on you, but—"

"He deserves worse than that! Wait till you hear. Somehow I kept anyone from suspecting and decided it was all for the best. I hadn't really loved him and probably would never love anybody—and I was more eager to join the W.E.N.C.H.E.S. than ever. I wasn't disqualified, they didn't insist on virgins. I cheered up.

"It wasn't until my skirts got tight that I realized."

"Pregnant?"

"He had me higher 'n a kite! Those skinflints I lived with ignored it as long as I could work—then kicked me out and the orphanage wouldn't take me back. I landed in a charity ward surrounded by other big bellies and trotted bedpans until my time came.

"One night I found myself on an operating table, with a nurse saying, 'Relax. Now breathe deeply.'

"I woke up in bed, numb from the chest down. My surgeon came in. 'How do you feel?' he says cheerfully.

"'Like a mummy.'

"'Naturally. You're wrapped

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like one and full of dope to keep you numb. You'll get well—but a Caesarian isn't a hangnail.'

"'Caesarian' I said. 'Doc—*did I lose the baby?*'

"'Oh, no. Your baby's fine.'

"'Oh. Boy or girl?'

"'A healthy little girl. Five pounds, three ounces.'

"I relaxed. It's something, to have made a baby. I told myself I would go somewhere and tack 'Mrs.' on my name and let the kid think her papa was dead—no orphanage for *my* kid!

"But the surgeon was talking. 'Tell me, uh—' He avoided my name. '—did you ever think your glandular setup was odd?"

"I said, 'Huh? Of course not. What are you driving at?'

He hesitated. 'I'll give you this in one dose, then a hypo to let you sleep off your jitters. You'll have 'em.'

"'Why?' I demanded.

"'Ever hear of that Scottish physician who was female until she was thirty-five?—then had surgery and became legally and medically a man? Got married. All okay.'

"'What's that got to do with me?'

"'That's what I'm saying. You're a man.'

"I tried to sit up. *'What?'*

"'Take it easy. When I opened you, I found a mess. I sent for the Chief of Surgery while I got the baby out, then we held a consultation with you on the table—and worked for hours to salvage what we could. You had two full sets of organs, both immature, but with the female set well enough developed for you to have a baby. They could never be any use to you again, so we took them out and rearranged things so that you can develop properly as a man.' He put a hand on me. 'Don't worry. You're young, your bones will readjust, we'll watch your glandular balance — and make a fine young man out of you.'

"I started to cry. 'What about my *baby?*'

"'Well, you can't nurse her, you haven't milk enough for a kitten. If I were you, I wouldn't see her—put her up for adoption.'

"*'No!'*

"He shrugged. 'The choice is yours; you're her mother—well, her parent. But don't worry now; we'll get you well first.'

"Next day they let me see the kid and I saw her daily—trying to get used to her. I had never seen a brand-new baby and had no idea how awful they look—my daughter looked like an orange monkey. My feeling changed to cold determination to do right by her. But four weeks later that didn't mean anything."

"Eh?"

"She was snatched."

"'Snatched?'"

The Unmarried Mother almost knocked over the bottle we had

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bet. "Kidnapped—stolen from the hospital nursery!" He breathed hard. "How's that for taking the last a man's got to live for?"

"A bad deal," I agreed. "Let's pour you another. No. clues?"

"Nothing the police could trace. Somebody came to see her, claimed to be her uncle. While the nurse had her back turned, he walked out with her."

"Description?"

"Just a man, with a face-shaped face, like yours or mine." He frowned. "I think it was the baby's father. The nurse swore it was an older man but he probably used makeup. Who else would swipe my baby? Childless women pull such stunts—but whoever heard of a man doing it?"

"What happened to you then?"

"Eleven more months of that grim place and three operations. In four months I started to grow a beard; before I was out I was shaving regularly . . . and no longer doubted that I was male." He grinned wryly. "I was staring down nurses' necklines."

"Well," I said, "seems to me you came through okay. Here you are, a normal man, making good money, no real troubles. And the life of a female is not an easy one."

He glared at me. "A lot you know about it!"

"So?"

"Ever hear the expression 'a ruined woman'?"

"Mmm, years ago. Doesn't mean much today."

"I was as ruined as a woman can be; that bum *really* ruined me—I was no longer a woman . . . and I didn't know *how* to be a man."

"Takes getting used to, I suppose."

"You have no idea. I don't mean learning how to dress, or not walking into the wrong rest room; I learned those in the hospital. But how could I *live*? What job could I get? Hell, I couldn't even drive a car. I didn't know a trade; I couldn't do manual labor—too much scar tissue, too tender.

"I hated him for having ruined me for the W.E.N.C.H.E.S., too, but I didn't know how much until I tried to join the Space Corps instead. One look at my belly and I was marked unfit for military service. The medical officer spent time on me just from curiosity; he had read about my case.

"So I changed my name and came to New York. I got by as a fry cook, then rented a typewriter and set myself up as a public stenographer — what a laugh! In four months I typed four letters and one manuscript. The manuscript was for *Real Life Tales* and a waste of paper, but the goof who wrote it, sold it. Which gave me an idea; I bought a stack of confession magazines and studied them." He looked

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cynical. "Now you know how I get the authentic woman's angle on an unmarried-mother story . . . through the only version I haven't sold—the true one. Do I win the bottle?"

I pushed it toward him. I was upset myself, but there was work to do. I said, "Son, you still want to lay hands on that so-and-so?"

His eyes lighted up — a feral gleam.

"Hold it!" I said. "You wouldn't kill him?"

He chuckled nastily. "Try me."

"Take it easy. I know more about it than you think I do. I can help you. I know where he is."

He reached across the bar. "*Where is he?*"

I said softly, "Let go my shirt, sonny—or you'll land in the alley and we'll tell the cops you fainted." I showed him the sap.

He let go. "Sorry. But where is he?" He looked at me. "And how do you know so much?"

"All in good time. There are records—hospital records, orphanage records, medical records. The matron of your orphanage was Mrs. Fetherage—right? She was followed by Mrs. Gruenstein — right? Your name, as a girl, was 'Jane'—right? And you didn't tell me any of this—right?"

I had him baffled and a bit scared. "What's this? You trying to make trouble for me?"

"No indeed. I've your welfare at heart. I can put this character in your lap. You do to him as you see fit—and I guarantee that you'll get away with it. But I don't think you'll kill him. You'd be nuts to—and you aren't nuts. Not quite."

He brushed it aside. "Cut the noise. *Where is he?*"

I poured him a short one; he was drunk but anger was offsetting it. "Not so fast. I do something for you—you do something for me."

"Uh . . . what?"

"You don't like your work. What would you say to high pay, steady work, unlimited expense account, your own boss on the job, and lots of variety and adventure?"

He stared. "I'd say, 'Get those goddam reindeer off my roof!' Shove it, Pop—there's no such job."

"Okay, put it this way: I hand him to you, you settle with him, then try my job. If it's not all I claim—well, I can't hold you."

He was wavering; the last drink did it. "When d'yuh d'liver 'im?" he said thickly.

"If it's a deal—*right now!*"

He shoved out his hand. "It's a deal!"

I nodded to my assistant to watch both ends, noted the time —2300—started to duck through the gate under the bar—when the juke box blared out: "*I'm My Own Granpaw!*" The service man had orders to load it with old Americana and classics because I

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couldn't stomach the "music" of 1970, but I hadn't known that tape was in it. I called out, "Shut that off! Give the customer his money back." I added, "Storeroom, back in a moment," and headed there with my Unmarried Mother following.

It was down the passage across from the johns, a steel door to which no one but my day manager and myself had a key; inside was a door to an inner room to which only I had a key. We went there.

He looked blearily around at windowless walls. "Where is 'e?"

"Right away." I opened a case, the only thing in the room; it was a U.S.F.F. Co-ordinates Transformer Field Kit, series 1992, Mod. II—a beauty, no moving parts, weight twenty-three kilos fully charged, and shaped to pass as a suitcase. I had adjusted it precisely earlier that day; all I had to do was to shake out the metal net which limits the transformation field.

Which I did. "Wha's that?" he demanded.

"Time machine," I said and tossed the net over us.

"Hey!" he yelled and stepped back. There is a technique to this; the net has to be thrown so that the subject will instinctively step back *onto* the metal mesh, then you close the net with both of you inside completely—else you might leave shoe soles behind or a piece of foot, or scoop up a slice of floor. But that's all the skill it takes. Some agents con a subject into the net; I tell the truth and use that instant of utter astonishment to flip the switch. Which I did.

1030-VI-3 April 1963 - Cleveland, Ohio-Apex Bldg.: "Hey!" he repeated. "Take this damn thing off!"

"Sorry," I apologized and did so, stuffed the net into the case, closed it. "You said you wanted to find him."

"But—You said that was a time machine!"

I pointed out a window. "Does that look like November? Or New York?" While he was gawking at new buds and spring weather, I reopened the case, took out a packet of hundred-dollar bills, checked that the numbers and signatures were compatible with 1963. The Temporal Bureau doesn't care how much you spend (it costs nothing) but they don't like unnecessary anachronisms. Too many mistakes, and a general court martial will exile you for a year in a nasty period, say 1974 with its strict rationing and forced labor. I never make such mistakes, the money was okay.

He turned around and said, "What happened?"

"He's here. Go outside and take him. Here's expense money."

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I shoved it at him and added, "Settle him, then I'll pick you up."

Hundred-dollar bills have a hypnotic effect on a person not used to them. He was thumbing them unbelievingly as I eased him into the hall, locked him out. The next jump was easy, a small shift in era.

7100-VI-10 March 1964 - Cleveland-Apex Bldg.: There was a notice under the door saying that my lease expired next week; otherwise the room looked as it had a moment before. Outside, trees were bare and snow threatened; I hurried, stopping only for contemporary money and a coat, hat, and topcoat I had left there when I leased the room. I hired a car, went to the hospital. It took twenty minutes to bore the nursery attendant to the point where I could swipe the baby without being noticed. We went back to the Apex Building. This dial setting was more involved as the building did not yet exist in 1945. But I had precalculated it.

0100 - VI - 20 Sept 1945 - Cleveland - Skyview Motel: Field kit, baby, and I arrived in a motel outside town. Earlier I had registered as "Gregory Johnson, Warren, Ohio," so we arrived in a room with curtains closed, windows locked, and doors bolted, and the floor cleared to allow for waver as the machine hunts. You can get a nasty bruise from a chair where it shouldn't be—not the chair of course, but backlash from the field.

No trouble. Jane was sleeping soundly; I carried her out, put her in a grocery box on the seat of a car I had provided earlier, drove to the orphanage, put her on the steps, drove two blocks to a "service station" (the petroleum products sort) and phoned the orphanage, drove back in time to see them taking the box inside, kept going and abandoned the car near the motel—walked to it and jumped forward to the Apex Building in 1963.

2200-VI-24 April 1963 - Cleveland-Apex Bldg.: I had cut the time rather fine — temporal accuracy depends on span, except on return to zero. If I had it right, Jane was discovering, out in the park this balmy spring night, that she wasn't quite as "nice" a girl as she had thought. I grabbed a taxi to the home of those skinflints, had the hackie wait around a corner while I lurked in shadows.

Presently I spotted them down the street, arms around each other. He took her up on the porch and made a long job of kissing her good-night — longer than I thought. Then she went in

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and he came down the walk, turned away. I slid into step and hooked an arm in his. "That's all, son," I announced quietly. "I'm back to pick you up."

"*You!*" He gasped and caught his breath.

"Me. Now you know who *he* is—and after you think it over you'll know who you are . . . and if you think hard enough, you'll figure out who the baby is . . . and who *I* am."

He didn't answer, he was badly shaken. It's a shock to have it proved to you that you can't resist seducing yourself. I took him to the Apex Building and we jumped again.

2300 - VII - 12 Aug 1985 - Sub Rockies Base: I woke the duty sergeant, showed my I.D., told the sergeant to bed my companion down with a happy pill and recruit him in the morning. The sergeant looked sour, but rank is rank, regardless of era; he did what I said—thinking, no doubt, that the next time we met he might be the colonel and I the sergeant. Which can happen in our corps: "What name?" he asked.

I wrote it out. He raised his eyebrows. "Like so, eh? *Hmm—*"

"You just do your job, Sergeant." I turned to my companion.

"Son, your troubles are over. You're about to start the best job a man ever held—and you'll do well. *I know.*"

"That you will!" agreed the sergeant. "Look at me—born in 1917—still around, still young, still enjoying life." I went back to the jump room, set everything on preselected zero.

2301-V-7 Nov 1970-NYC-"Pop's Place": I came out of the storeroom carrying a fifth of Drambuie to account for the minute I had been gone. My assistant was arguing with the customer who had been playing *"I'm My Own Granpaw!"* I said, "Oh, let him play it, then unplug it." I was very tired.

It's rough, but somebody must do it and it's very hard to recruit anyone in the later years, since the Mistake of 1972. Can you think of a better source than to pick people all fouled up where they are and give them well-paid, interesting (even though dangerous) work in a necessary cause? Everybody knows now why the Fizzle War of 1963 fizzled. The bomb with New York's number on it didn't go off, a hundred other things didn't go as planned—all arranged by the likes of me.

But not the Mistake of '72; that one *is not our fault*—and can't be undone; there's no paradox to resolve. A thing either is, or it isn't, now and forever amen. But there won't be another like it; an order dated "1992" takes precedence any year.

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I closed five minutes early, leaving a letter in the cash register telling my day manager that I was accepting his offer to buy me out, so see my lawyer as I was leaving on a long vacation. The Bureau might or might not pick up his payments, but they want things left tidy. I went to the room back of the storeroom and forward to 1993.

2200 - VII - 12 Jan 1993 - Sub Rockies Annex - HQ Temporal DOL: I checked in with the duty officer and went to my quarters, intending to sleep for a week. I had fetched the bottle we bet (after all, I won it) and took a drink before I wrote my report. It tasted foul and I wondered why I had ever liked Old Underwear. But it was better than nothing; I don't like to be cold sober, I think too much. But I don't really hit the bottle either; other people have snakes—I have people.

I dictated my report; forty recruitments all okayed by the Psych Bureau—counting my own, which I knew would be okayed. I was here, wasn't I? Then I taped a request for assignment to operations; I was sick of recruiting. I dropped both in the slot and headed for bed.

My eye fell on "The By-Laws of Time," over my bed:

Never Do Yesterday What Should Be Done Tomorrow.

If At Last You Do Succeed, Never Try Again.

A Stitch in Time Saves Nine Billion.

A Paradox May Be Paradoctored.

It Is Earlier When You Think.

Ancestors Are Just People.

Even Jove Nods.

They didn't inspire me the way they had when I was a recruit; thirty subjective-years of time-jumping wears you down. I undressed and when I got down to the hide I looked at my belly. A Caesarian leaves a big scar but I'm so hairy now that I don't notice it unless I look for it.

Then I glanced at the ring on my finger.

The Snake That Eats Its Own Tail, Forever and Ever . . . I *know* where *I* came from—but *where did all you zombies come from?*

I felt a headache coming on, but a headache powder is one thing I do not take. I did once—and you all went away.

So I crawled into bed and whistled out the light.

You aren't really there at all. There isn't anybody but me — Jane—here alone in the dark.

I miss you dreadfully!

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SCIENCE

Last month Isaac Asimov explored the mysteries of large numbers. It now emerges that he was only setting out signposts in preparation for a discussion of the nature, and unlikelihood, of ...

NOTHING

by Isaac Asimov

THE WORD "VACUUM" COMES FROM the Latin "vacuus" meaning "empty." (We run close to the original in non-scientific lingo, too, as when we talk of a "vacuous stare.") Consequently, a vacuum is empty space, or space that contains nothing.

This is fine, in theory, and we talk easily of vacuums when all we mean is a volume of space with less matter in it than we are accustomed to. The question is, though: Does a true vacuum actually exist anywhere in the Universe? Or, to put it another way: Is there such a thing as Nothing?

In between atoms of a gas, there is no matter in the ordinary sense (there may be stray electrons or neutrinos), so we can speak of an "interatomic vacuum." However, if we raise ourselves above the atomic level and consider a reasonable volume of the Universe, say a cubic centimeter, then the question of a vacuum grows more interesting.

For instance, at sea-level pressure and 20° C. (68° F.), air has a density of 0.0012 grams per cubic centimeter. This means that

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every cubic centimeter contains 2.5 x 10^{19} molecules of oxygen and nitrogen. Almost all the mass of the molecule is in the protons and neutrons (together called nucleons) in the nuclei of the atoms making them up. The oxygen molecule contains 32 nucleons and the nitrogen molecule 28. There are four nitrogen molecules for every oxygen molecule in the atmosphere, so, altogether, ordinary air contains 7.25 x 10^{20} nucleons per cubic centimeter.

In the laboratory, it is possible to prepare a volume of space from which nearly all the air has been evacuated. This is *called* a vacuum, and in very good man-made vacuums the amount of air left is only about a ten billionth of the original quantity.

That's not bad, you understand, but even such a man-made vacuum retains about 7.25 x 10^{10} nucleons per cubic centimeter. That's nearly a hundred billion nucleons in every cubic centimeter and that sounds as though there's still a bit of crowding going on.

Of course, the science fiction reader knows a trick worth several times this. There is always the "vacuum of outer space."

After all, as we move up away from the Earth, the atmosphere progressively thins out. At a height of 200 miles or so, it becomes a vacuum that is at least as good as any we can make in the laboratory, and at a height still greater, the vacuum is still better. (Or to use the appropriate jargon, it is still "harder.")

But even though interplanetary space is a good vacuum compared to the miserable specimens we can manage in the lab, it is still far from Nothing. There is the debris left over from the dust and gas out of which the Solar system was formed. In fact, even in interstellar space — the vast reaches between the stars—there is still debris left over from the original dust and gas used in the formation of the stars. The interstellar matter is thick enough to raise obscuring black clouds out here in the galactic arms, where our Sun is located and where most of the dust exists (as compared with the comparatively dustless galactic center), and conditions are similar in other galaxies.

The average density of matter in interstellar space within a galaxy is 10^{-21} grams per cubic centimeter, according to some (necessarily rough) estimates I have seen. This would amount to only 1000 nucleons per cubic centimeter. Interstellar space is a vacuum that is nearly a hundred million times as hard as any we can manage, but it obviously isn't Nothing.

Still, we have one more trick to play. What about the stupendous distances between the galaxies, distances that dwarf the already tremendous stretches be-

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tween the stars within a galaxy. Surely, intergalactic space ought to be emptier than interstellar space . . . and it is.

But even intergalactic space is not quite Nothing. Astronomers still detect *some* matter there—enough to leave its mark on light reaching us from distant galaxies.

But if intergalactic space is not Nothing, how near Nothing is it? The lowest figure I've seen for the density of the matter in intergalactic space is (and again I warn you, it's only a rough approximation) 10^{-24} grams per cubic centimeter. This amounts to just about 1 nucleon per cubic centimeter.

This is as close to Nothing as anything in the Universe ever gets (or, perhaps, ever can get). It's so close to Nothing that it would seem at first glance that we can just call it Nothing and forget about it.

But can we forget about it? Is it so close to Nothing that it doesn't matter? Let's see.

First, Space is large and we needn't confine ourselves to pinches of it. Suppose we take a volume the size of the Earth and imagine it filled with intergalactic matter. The Earth takes up a large number of cubic centimeters —1.1×10^{27} to be exact. There would be 1 nucleon for each of those and the total mass of these would come to 1800 grams (4 pounds).

The Sun, which has a volume that is 1,300,000 times that of the Earth, would, if composed of intergalactic material, contain a mass of 2.3×10^{9} grams or 2600 *tons*.

However, it is unfair to try to get an idea of intergalactic matter by using such small units of volume. The Earth and the Sun are submicroscopic dots compared to the Universe, and their volumes, from the large point of view, are beneath contempt. We have all space to consider.

In measuring distance outside our Solar system, the smallest useful unit is the light-year. Surely, then, in measuring spatial volume, we ought to use cubic light-years as the minimum unit. (A cubic light-year is, of course, a cube which is 1 light-year—9½ trillion kilometers, or 5.9 trillion miles—on each side.)

Now we have something! This hardest of all hard vacuums, this Nothingest of all Nothings, still piles up matter in the trillions of trillions of tons when a volume of a cubic light-year is involved. And, after all, a cubic light-year, large as it is from a human standpoint, is an insignificant fraction of the volume of the Universe.

To show you what I mean, consider that the 200-inch telescope can penetrate over a billion light years in every direction, and, as far as we can see or photograph, galaxies stretch out. There is no

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way of telling yet how much further the Universe reaches, but let's imagine a sphere with ourselves at the center and a radius of a billion light years. We'll content ourselves with this (no doubt tiny) fraction of all, and call it the "Observable Universe."

With a radius of a billion (10^9) light years, the volume of the Observable Universe can be calculated easily enough. It turns out to be 4×10^{27} (four thousand trillion trillion or four octillion), cubic light-years. You see, I was right in saying that a single cubic light-year is a mere speck.

(Not all the Universe is intergalactic space, of course; some of it consists of the galaxies themselves. However, the galaxies make up only a tenth of a percent of all space.)

At the rate of 1 nucleon per cubic centimeter, the amount of matter in the intergalactic space of the Observable Universe comes to 5.6×10^{57} grams.

This sounds like a lot, and 5600000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000 grams *is* a lot. How much is it, though, on a Universal scale? For instance, how much is it in comparison to the mass of a star. Our own Sun, an average star, has a mass of 2×10^{33} grams, so the intergalactic matter weighs much more than a star—much, much more. In fact, the amount of intergalactic matter in only a couple of thousand cubic light-years equals the mass of the Sun.

However, the Sun is only one of many. Our galaxy contains about a hundred billion (10^{11}) galaxies. The total mass of all the stars in the galaxy is therefore about 2×10^{44} grams (assuming the Sun's mass to be the average for stars, which it probably is). As you see, the intergalactic matter weighs more than the stars in an entire Galaxy—much more.

But our Galaxy is also only one of many. In the Observable Universe, it is estimated that there are about a hundred billion (10^{11}) Galaxies. The total mass of all the stars in the Observable Universe is therefore 2×10^{55} grams—which still falls short.

This means that intergalactic matter is more massive than all the stars in all the galaxies—280 times more massive.

In fact, a god-like creature from outside our Universe, looking over the entire business with a casual eye would be justified in describing it as nothing more than a hard vacuum. He would be just as right to ignore the occasional dots of non-vacuum—the stars and the plants—as we are in ignoring dust particles when we describe our atmosphere as a gas.

From our point of view, however, is the vacuum of intergalactic space Nothing?

Heck, no! If we consider only quantity—it's nearly Everything.

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Theodore Sturgeon's A Touch of Strange *(F&SF, Jan. '58) investigated the subject of mermaids with both clinical and poetic thoroughness. Such is the nature of poetry and mermaids, however, that there is always room for another look—as is evidenced in this new story from Mr. Bradbury's forthcoming collection,* A MEDICINE FOR LONELINESS *(Doubleday).*

The Shoreline at Sunset

by Ray Bradbury

TOM, KNEEDEEP IN THE WAVES, A piece of driftwood in his hand, listened.

The house, up toward the coast highway in the late afternoon, was silent. The sounds of closets being rummaged, suitcase locks snapping, vases being smashed, and of a final door crashing shut, all had faded away.

Chico, standing on the pale sand, flourished his wire-strainer to shake out a harvest of lost coins. After a moment, without glancing at Tom, he said, "Let her go."

So it was every year. For a week, or a month, their house would have music swelling from the windows, there would be new geraniums potted on the porch-rail, new paint on the doors and steps. The clothes on the wire-line changed from harlequin pants to sheath-dresses to hand-made Mexican frocks like white waves breaking behind the house. Inside, the paintings on the walls shifted from imitation Matisse to pseudo-Italian Renaissance. Sometimes, looking up, he would see a woman drying her hair like a bright yellow flag on the wind. Sometimes the flag was black or red. Sometimes the woman was tall, sometimes short, against the sky. But there was never more than one woman at a time. And, at last, a day like today came . . .

Tom placed his driftwood on the growing pile near where Chico sifted the billion footprints left by people long vanished from their holidays.

"Chico. What are we doing here?"

"Living the life of Reilly, boy!"

"I don't feel like Reilly, Chico."

"Work at it, boy!"

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Tom saw the house a month from now, the flowerpots blowing dust, the walls hung with empty squares, only sand carpeting the floors. The rooms would echo like shells in the wind. And all night every night, bedded in separate rooms he and Chico would hear a tide falling away and away down a long shore, leaving no trace.

Tom nodded, imperceptibly. Once a year he himself brought a nice girl here knowing she was right at last and that in no time they would be married. But his women always stole silently away before dawn, feeling they had been mistaken for someone else, not being able to play the part. Chico's friends left like vacuum-cleaners, with a terrific drag, roar, rush, leaving no lint unturned, no clam unprized of its pearl, taking their purses with them like toy-dogs which Chico had petted as he opened their jaws to count their teeth.

"That's four women so far this year."

"Okay, referee." Chico grinned. "Show me the way to the showers."

"Chico—" Tom bit his lower lip, then went on. "I been thinking. Why don't we split up?"

Chico just looked at him.

"I mean," said Tom, quickly, "maybe we'd have better luck, alone."

"Well, I'll be god-damned," said Chico, slowly, gripping the strainer in his big fists before him. "Look here, boy, don't you know the facts? You and me, we'll be here come the year 2000. A couple of crazy dumb old gooney-birds drying their bones in the sun. Nothing's ever going to happen to us now, Tom, it's too late. Get that through your head and shut up."

Tom swallowed and looked steadily at the other man. "I'm thinking of leaving—next week."

"Shut up, shut up, and get to work!"

Chico gave the sand an angry showering rake that tilled him forty-three cents in dimes, pennies, and nickels. He stared blindly at the coins shimmering down the wires like a pinball game all afire.

Tom did not move, holding his breath.

They both seemed to be waiting for something.

The something happened.

"Hey . . . hey . . . oh, hey . . . !"

From a long way off down the coast a voice called

The two men turned slowly.

"Hey . . . hey . . . oh, hey . . .!"

A boy was running, yelling, waving, along the shore two hundred yards away. There was something in his voice that made Tom feel suddenly cold. He held onto his own arms, waiting.

"Hey!"

The boy pulled up, gasping,

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pointing back along the shore.

"A woman, a funny woman, by the North Rock!"

"A woman!" The words exploded from Chico's mouth and he began to laugh. "Oh, no, no!"

"What you mean, a 'funny' woman?" asked Tom.

"I don't know," cried the boy, his eyes wide. "You got to come see! Awfully funny!"

"You mean drowned?"

"Maybe! She came out of the water, she's lying on the shore, you got to see, yourself . . . funny . . ." The boy's voice died. He gazed off north again. "She's got a fish's tail."

Chico laughed. "Not before supper, thanks."

"Please," cried the boy, dancing now. "No lie! Oh, hurry!"

He ran off, sensed he was not followed, and looked back in dismay.

Tom felt his lips move. "Boy wouldn't run this far for a joke, would he, Chico?"

"People have run further for less."

Tom started walking. "All right, son."

"Thanks, mister, oh thanks!"

The boy ran. Twenty yards up the coast, Tom looked back. Behind him, Chico squinted, shrugged, dusted his hands wearily, and followed.

They moved north along the twilight beach, their skin weathered in tiny lizard folds about their burnt pale-water eyes, looking younger for their hair cut close to the skull so you could not see the grey. There was a fair wind and the ocean rose and fell with prolonged concussions.

"What," said Tom, "what if we get to North Rock and it's true? What if the ocean *has* washed some *thing* up?"

But before Chico could answer, Tom was gone, his mind racing down coast littered with horseshoe crabs, sand-dollars, starfish, kelp, and stone. From all the times he'd talked on what lives in the sea, the names returned with the breathing fall of waves. Argonauts, they whispered, codlings, pollacks, houndfish, tautog, tench, sea-elephant, they whispered, gillings, flounders, and beluga the white whale and grampus the sea-dog . . . always you thought how these must look from their deep-sounding names. Perhaps you would never in your life see them rise from the salt meadows beyond the safe limits of the shore, but they were there, and their names, with a thousand others, made pictures. And you looked and wished you were a frigate-bird that might fly nine thousand miles around to return some year with the full size of the ocean in your head.

"Oh, quick!" The boy had run back to peer in Tom's face. "It might be gone!"

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"Keep your shirt on, boy," said Chico.

They came around the North Rock. A second boy stood there, looking down.

Perhaps from the corner of his eye, Tom saw something on the sand that made him hesitate to look straight at it, but fix instead on the face of the boy standing there. The boy was pale and he seemed not to breathe. On occasion he remembered to take a breath, his eyes focussed, but the more they saw there on the sand the more they took time off from focussing and turned blank and looked stunned. When the ocean came in over his tennis shoes, he did not move or notice.

Tom glanced away from the boy to the sand.

And Tom's face, in the next moment, became the face of the boy. His hands assumed the same curl at his sides and his mouth moved to open and stay half open and his eyes, which were light in color, seemed to bleach still more with so much looking.

The setting sun was ten minutes above the sea.

"A big wave came in and went out," said the first boy, "and here she was."

They looked at the woman lying there.

Her hair was very long and it lay on the beach like the threads of an immense harp. The water stroked along the threads and floated them up and let them down, each time in a different fan and silhouette. The hair must have been five or six feet long and now it was strewn on the hard wet sand and it was the color of limes.

Her face . . .

The men bent half down in wonder.

Her face was white sand sculpture, with a few water drops shimmering on it like summer rain upon a cream-colored rose. Her face was that moon which when seen by day is pale and unbelievable in the blue sky. It was milk-marble veined with faint violet in the temples. The eyelids, closed down upon the eyes were powdered with a faint water-color, as if the eyes beneath gazed through the fragile tissue of the lids and saw them standing there above her looking down and looking down. The mouth was a pale flushed sea-rose, full and closed upon itself. And her neck was slender and white and her breasts were small and white, now covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered in the flow of water, the ebb of water, the flow, the ebb, the flow. And the breasts were flushed at their tips, and her body was startlingly white, almost an illumination, a white-green lightning against the sand. And as the water shifted her, her skin glinted like the surface of a pearl.

The lower half of her body changed itself from white to very

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pale blue, from very pale blue to pale green, from pale green to emerald green, to moss and lime green, to scintillas and sequins all dark green, all flowing away in a fount, a curve, a rush of light and dark, to end in a lacy fan, a spread of foam and jewel on the sand. The two halves of this creature were so joined as to reveal no point of fusion where pearl woman, woman of a whiteness made of cream-water and clear sky merged with that half which belonged to the amphibious slide and rush of current that came up on the shore and shelved down the shore, tugging its half toward its proper home. The woman was the sea, the sea was woman. There was no flaw or seam, no wrinkle or stitch; the illusion, if illusion it was, held perfectly together and the blood from one moved into and through and mingled with what must have been the ice-waters of the other.

"I wanted to run get help." The first boy seemed not to want to raise his voice. "But Skip said she was dead and there's no help for that. Is she?"

"She was never alive," said Chico. "Sure," he went on, feeling their eyes on him suddenly. "It's something left over from a movie studio. Liquid rubber skinned over a steel frame. A prop, a dummy."

"Oh, no, it's real!"

"We'll find a label somewhere," said Chico. "Here."

"Don't!" cried the first boy.

"Hell." Chico touched the body to turn it, and stopped. He knelt there, his face changing.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

Chico took his hand away and looked at it. "I was wrong." His voice faded.

Tom took the woman's wrist. "There's a pulse."

"You're feeling your own heartbeat."

"I just don't know . . . maybe . . . maybe . . ."

The woman was there and her upper body was all moon pearl and tidal cream and her lower body all slithering ancient green-black coins that slid upon themselves in the shift of wind and water

"There's a trick somewhere!" cried Chico, suddenly.

"No. No!" Just as suddenly Tom burst out in laughter. "No trick! My God, my God, I feel great! I haven't felt so great since I was a kid!"

They walked slowly around her. A wave touched her white hand so the fingers faintly softly waved. The gesture was that of someone asking for another and another wave to come in and lift the fingers and then the wrist and then the arm and then head and finally the body and take all of them together back down out to sea.

"Tom." Chico's mouth opened

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and closed. "Why don't you go get our truck?"

Tom didn't move.

"You hear me?" said Chico.

"Yes, but—"

"But what? We could sell this somewhere, I don't know — the university, that aquarium at Seal Beach or . . . well, hell, why couldn't we just set up a place? Look." He shook Tom's arm. "Drive to the pier. Buy us three hundred pounds of chipped ice. When you take anything out of the water you *need* ice, don't you?"

"I never thought."

"Think about it! Get moving!"

"I don't know, Chico."

"What you mean? She's real, isn't she?" He turned to the boys. "*You* say she's real, don't you? Well, then, what are we waiting for?"

"Chico," said Tom. "You better go get the ice yourself."

"Someone's got to stay and make sure she don't go back out with the tide!"

"Chico," said Tom. "I don't know how to explain. I don't want to get that ice for you."

"I'll go myself, then. Look, boys, build the sand up here to keep the waves back. I'll give you five bucks apiece. Hop to it!"

The sides of the boys' faces were bronze pink from the sun which was touching the horizon now. Their eyes were a bronze color looking at Chico.

"My God!" said Chico. "This is better than finding ambergris!" He ran to the top of the nearest dune, called, "Get to work!" and was gone.

Now Tom and the two boys were left with the lonely woman by the North Rock and the sun was one-fourth of the way below the western horizon. The sand and the woman were pink gold.

"Just a little line," whispered the second boy. He drew his fingernail along under his own chin, gently. He nodded to the woman. Tom bent again to see the faint line under either side of her firm white chin, the small almost invisible line where the gills were or had been and were now almost sealed shut, invisible.

He looked at the face and the great strands of hair spread out in a lyre on the shore.

"She's beautiful," he said.

The boys nodded without knowing it.

Behind them, a gull leaped up quickly from the dunes. The boys gasped and turned to stare.

Tom felt himself trembling. He saw the boys were trembling, too. A car horn hooted. Their eyes blinked, suddenly afraid. They looked up toward the highway.

A wave poured about the body, framing it in a clear white pool of water.

Tom nodded the boys to one side.

The wave moved the body an

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inch in and two inches out toward the sea.

The next wave came and moved the body two inches in and six inches out toward the sea.

"But—" said the first boy.

Tom shook his head.

The third wave lifted the body two feet down toward the sea. The wave after that drifted the body another foot down the shingles and the next three moved it six feet down.

The first boy cried out and ran after it.

Tom reached him and held his arm. The boy looked helpless and afraid and sad.

For a moment there were no more waves. Tom looked at the woman, thinking, she's true, she's real, she's mine . . . but . . she's dead. Or will be if she stays here.

"We can't let her go," said the first boy. "We can't, we just can't!"

The other boy stepped between the woman and the sea. "What would we do with her?" he wanted to know, looking at Tom, "if we kept her?"

The first boy tried to think. "We could—we could—" He stopped and shook his head. "Oh, my Gosh."

The second boy stepped out of the way and left a path from the woman to the sea.

The next was a big one. It came in and went out and the sand was empty. The whiteness was gone and the black diamonds and the great threads of the harp.

They stood by the edge of the sea, looking out, the man and the two boys, until they heard the truck driving up on the dunes behind them.

The last of the sun was gone.

They heard footsteps running down the dunes and someone yelling.

They drove back down the darkening beach in the light truck with the big-treaded tires, in silence. The two boys sat in the rear on the bags of chipped ice. After a long while, Chico began to swear steadily, half to himself, spitting out the window.

"Three hundred pounds of ice. Three hundred *pounds* of ice! What do I do with it now? And I'm soaked to the skin, soaked! You didn't even move when I jumped in and swam out to look around! Idiot, idiot! You haven't changed! Like every other time, like always, you do nothing, nothing, just stand there, stand there, do nothing, nothing, just stare!"

"And what did you do, I ask, what?" said Tom, in a tired voice, looking ahead. "The same as you always did, just the same, no different at all. You should've seen yourself."

They dropped the boys off at their beach-house. The youngest spoke in a voice you could hardly hear against the wind.

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"Gosh, nobody'll ever believe..."

The two men drove down the coast and parked.

Chico sat for two or three minutes waiting for his fists to relax on his lap, and then he snorted.

"Hell. I guess things turn out for the best." He took a deep breath. "It just came to me. Funny. Twenty, thirty years from now, middle of the night, our phone'll ring. It'll be one of those two boys, grownup, calling long-distance from a bar somewhere. Middle of the night, them calling to ask one question. It's *true*, isn't it? they'll say. It *did* happen, didn't it? Back in 1958, it really happened to *us*? And we'll sit there on the edge of the bed, middle of the night, saying, Sure, boy, sure, it really happened, to us, in 1958. And they'll say, Thanks, and we'll say, Don't mention it, any old time. And we'll all say goodnight. And maybe they won't call again for a couple of years."

The two men sat on their front-porch steps in the dark.

"Tom?"

"What?"

Chico waited a moment.

"You're not going away."

It was not a question but a quiet statement.

Tom thought about it, his cigarette dead in his fingers. And he knew he would never go away now. For tomorrow and the day after and the day after the day after that, he knew he would walk down and go swimming there in all the green lace and the white fires and the dark caverns in the hollows under the waves. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

"That's right, Chico. I'm staying here."

Now the silver looking-glasses advanced in a crumpling line all along the coast from a thousand miles north to a thousand miles south. The mirrors did not reflect so much as one building or one tree or one highway or one car or even one man himself. The mirrors reflected only the quiet moon and then shattered into a billion bits of glass that spread out in a glaze on the shore. Then the sea was dark awhile, preparing another line of mirrors to rear up and surprise the two men who sat there for a long time, never once blinking their eyes, waiting.

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Zenna Henderson's series about The People—that specially talented, wonderful group of people from another star, stranded on Earth after an unobserved spaceship crash—comes to a close with Jordan. *It is probable that the series will soon be out in book form; in the meantime, the following is a complete list of The People stories, all from F&SF:* Ararat *(Oct. '52),* Gilead *(Aug. '54),* Pottage *(Sept. '55),* Wilderness *(Jan. '57),* Captivity *(June, '58), and* Jordan, *herewith. It is a memorable group. . . .*

JORDAN

by Zenna Henderson

I GUESS I WAS THE FIRST TO SEE IT — the bright form among the clouds above Baldy. There seemed to be no interval of wondering or questioning in my mind. I knew the moment I caught the metallic gleam—the instant the curl-back of the clouds gave a brief glimpse of a long sleek curve. I knew and I gave a shout of delight. Here it was! What more direct answer to a prayer could any fellow want? Just like that! My release from rebellion, the long-waited answer to my protests against restrictions! There above me was release! I emptied my two hands of the gravel I had made of two small rocks, during the time I had brooded on my boulder, dusted my palms against my levis and lifted myself above the brush. I turned towards home, the tops of the underbrush ticking off the distance against my trailing toes. But oddly I felt a brief, remote pang—almost of . . . regret?

As I neared the Canyon, I heard the cry, and saw one after another of the Group shoot upwards towards Baldy. I forgot that momentary pang and shot upwards with the rest of them. And my hands were among the first to feel the tingly hot-and-cold sleekness of the ship that was cooling yet from the heat of entry into the atmosphere. It was only a matter

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of minutes before the hands of the whole Group from the Canyon bore the ship downwards from the clouds to the haven of the pine flats beyond Cougar—bore it rejoicing, singing an almost forgotten welcome song of The People.

Still tingling to the Song, I rushed to Obla's house, bringing, as always, any new event to her, since she could come to none.

"Obla! Obla!" I cried as I slammed in through her door. "They've come! They've come! They're here! Someone from the New Home—" Then I remembered, and I Went In to her mind. The excitement so filled my own mind that I didn't even have to verbalize for her before she caught the sight. Through my wordlessly sputtering delight, I caught her faint chuckle. "Bram, the ship couldn't have rainbows around it and be diamond studded from end to end!"

I laughed too, a little abashed. "No, I guess not," I thought back at her. "But it should have a halo on it!"

Then for the next while I sat in the quiet room and relived every second of the event for Obla—the sights, the sounds, the smells, the feel of everything, including a detailed description of the — haloless — ship. And Obla, deaf, blind, voiceless, armless, legless, Obla who would horrify most any outsider, lived the whole event with me, questioned me minutely, and finally lifted her unheard voice with the rest of us in the song of Welcome.

"Obla." I moved closer to her and looked down at the quiet, scarred face, framed in the abundance of dark, vigorous hair. "Obla, it means The Home, the real Home. And for you—"

"And for me—" Her lips tightened and her eyelids flattened. Then the curtain of her hair swirled across her face as she hid herself from my eyes. "Perhaps a kinder world to hide this hideous—"

"Not hideous!" I cried indignantly.

Her soft chuckle tickled my mind. "Well, *not*, anyway," she said. "You'll have to admit that the explosion didn't leave much of me—" Her hair flowed back from her face and spread across the pillow.

"The part of you that counts!" I exclaimed.

"On Earth you need a physical container," she said. "One that functions. And just once, I wish that—" Her mind blanked before I could catch her wish. The glass of water lifted from the bedside stand and hovered at her mouth. She drank briefly. The glass slid back to its place.

"So you're all afire to blast off?" her thought teased. "Back to civil-

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ization! Farewell to the rugged frontier!"

"Yes, I am," I said defiantly. "You know how I feel. It's criminal to waste lives like ours. If we can't live to capacity here, let's go Home!"

"To which Home?" She questioned. "The one we knew is gone. What is the new one like?"

"Well," I hesitated. "I don't know. We haven't communicated yet. But it must be almost like the old Home. At least it's probably inhabited by The People, our People."

"Are you so sure we're still the same People?" persisted Obla, "Or that they are? Time and distance can change—"

"Of course we're the same," I cried. "That's like asking if a dog is a dog in the Canyon just because he was born in Socorro."

"I had a dog once," said Obla. "A long time ago. He thought he was people because he'd never been around other dogs. It took him six months to learn to bark. It came as quite a blow to him when he found out he was a dog."

"If you mean we've deteriorated since we came—"

"You chose the dog, not I," she said. "Let's not quarrel. Besides, I didn't say that *we* were the dog."

"Yeah, but—"

"Yeah, but—" she echoed, amused, and I laughed.

"Darn you, Obla, that's the way most of my arguments with you end—yeah-but, yeah-but!"

"Why don't they come out?" I rapped impatiently against the vast seamless bulk, shadowy above me in the night. "What's the delay?"

"You're being a child, Bram," said Jemmy. "They have their reasons for waiting. Remember this is a strange world to them. They must be sure—"

"Sure!" I gestured impatiently. "We've *told* them the air's okay and there's no viruses waiting to snap them off. Besides, they have their personal shields. They don't even have to *touch* this earth if they don't want to. Why don't they come out?"

"Bram." I recognized the tone of Jemmy's voice.

"Oh, I know, I know," I said. "Impatience, impatience. Everything in its own good time. But now, Jemmy, now that they're here, you and Valancy will have to give in. They'll make you see that the thing for us People to do is to get out completely or else get in there with the Outsiders and clean up this mess of a world. With this new help we could we could do it easily. We could take over key positions—"

"No matter how many have come—and we don't know yet how many there are," said Jemmy. "This 'taking over' isn't the way of the People. Things must

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grow. You only graft in extreme cases. And destroy practically never.

"But let's not get involved in all that again now. Valancy—"

Valancy slanted down, the stars behind her, from above the ship. "Jemmy." Their hands brushed as her feet reached the ground. There it was again. That wordless flame of joy, that completeness as they met, after a long ten minutes separation. *That* made me impatient, too. I never felt that kind of oneness with anyone.

I heard Valancy's little laugh. "Oh Bram," she said. "Do you have to have your whole dinner in one gulp? Can't you be content to wait for anything?"

"It might be a good idea for you to do a little concentrated thinking," said Jemmy. "They won't be coming out until in the morning. You stay here on guard tonight—"

"On guard against what?" I asked.

"Against impatience," said Jemmy, his voice taking on the Old One tone that expected obedience without having to demand it. Amusement had crept back into his voice before his next sentence. "For the good of your soul, Bram, and the contemplation of your sins, keep watch this whole night. I have a couple of blankets in the pick-up." He gestured and the blankets drifted through the scrub oak. "There, that'll hold you till morning."

I watched the two of them meet with the pick-up truck above the thin trickle of the creek. Valancy called back. "Thinking *might* help, Bram. You should try it."

A startled night bird flapped dismally ahead of them for a while and then the darkness took them all.

I spread the blankets on the sand by the ship, leaning against the smooth coolness of its outer skin, marveling anew at its seamlessness, its unbroken flow the full length. Somewhere there had to be an exit, but right now the evening light ran uninterrupted from glowing end to glowing end.

Who was in there? How many were in there? A ship of this size could carry hundreds. Their communicator and ours had spoken briefly together, ours stumbling a little with words we remembered of the Home tongue that seemed to have changed or fallen out of use, but no mention of numbers was made before the final thought: "We are tired. It's a long journey. Thanks be to the Power, the Presence and the Name that we have found you. We will rest until morning."

The drone of a high flying turbo-jet above the Canyon caught my ear. I glanced quickly up. Our un-light still humped itself up over the betraying shine of

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the ship. I relaxed on the blankets, wondering . . . wondering.

It was so long ago—back in my grandparent's day—that it all happened. The Home, smashed to a handful of glittering confetti—the People scattered to every compass point, looking for refuge. It was all in my memory, the stream of remembrance that ties the People so strongly together. If I let myself, I could suffer the loss, the wandering, the tedium and terror of the search for a new world. I could live again the shrieking incandescent entry into Earth's atmosphere, the heat, the vibration, the wrenching and shattering. And I could share the bereavement, the tears, the blinding, maiming agony of some of the survivors who made it to Earth. And I could hide and dodge and run and die with all who suffered the settlement period—trying to find the best way to fit in unnoticed among the people of Earth and yet not lose our identity as the People.

But this was all the past — though sometimes I wonder if anything is ever past. It is the future I'm impatient for. Why, look at the area of international relations alone. Valency could sit at the table at the next summit conference and read the truth behind all the closed, wary, sparring faces—truth naked and blinding as the glint of the moon on the edge of a metal door . . . opening . . . opening . . .

I snatched myself to awareness. Soneone was leaving the ship. I lifted a couple of inches off the sand and slid along quietly in the shadow. The figure came out, carefully, fearfully. The door swung shut and the figure straightened. Cautious step followed cautious step, then, in a sudden flurry of movement, the figure was running down the creek bed—fast! Fast! For about a hundred feet, and then it collapsed, face down onto the stand.

I streaked over and hovered. "Hi!" I said.

Convulsively the figure turned over and I was looking down into her face. I caught her name — Salla.

"Are you hurt?" I asked audibly.

"No," she thought. "No," she articulated with an effort. "I'm not used to—" she groped— "running." She sounded apologetic, not for being unused to running, but for running. She sat up and I sat down. We acquainted one another with our faces and I liked very much what I saw. It was a sort of restatement of Valancy's luminously pale skin and dark eyes and warm, lovely mouth. She turned away and I caught the faint glimmer of her personal shield.

"You don't need it," I said. "It's warm and pleasant tonight."

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"But—" Again I caught the embarrassed apology.

"Oh surely not always!" I protested. "What a grim deal. Shields are only for emergencies!"

She hesitated a moment and then the glimmer died. I caught the faint fragrance of her and thought ruefully that if I had a—fragrance?—it was probably compounded of barnyard, lumber mill and supper hamburgers.

She drew a deep cautious breath. "Oh!" she cried. "Growing things! Life everywhere! We've been so long on the way. Smell it!"

Obligingly I did but was conscious only of a crushed manzanita smell from beneath the ship.

This is kind of an aside, because I can't stop in my story at every turn and try to explain. Outsiders, I suppose, have no parallel for the way Salla and I got acquainted. Under all the talk, under all the activity and busy-ness in the times that followed, was a deep underflow of communication between the two of us. Far under the need for audibility or for verbalization, questioning, answering, explaining, exploring. What was obvious to a bystander was the least of the communication between us. I had felt this same type of awareness before when our In-gathering brought new members of the Group to the Canyon, but never quite so strongly as with Salla. It must have been more noticeable because we lacked many of the common experiences that are shared by those who have occupied the same Earth together since birth. That must have been it.

"I remember," said Salla as she sifted sand through slender, unused-looking hands, "when I was very small I went out in the rain." She paused, as though for a reaction. "Without my shield," she amplified. Again the pause. "I got *wet!*" she cried, determined, apparently, to shock me.

"Last week," I said, "I walked in the rain and got so wet that my shoes squelched at every step and the clean taste of rain was in my mouth. It's one of my favorite pastimes . . . There's something so quiet about rain," I went on. "Even when there's wind and thunder, there's a stillness about it. I like it."

Then, shaken by hearing myself say such things aloud, I sifted sand too, a little violently at first.

She reached over with a slender, milky finger and touched my hand. "Brown," she said. Then "Tan," as she caught my thought.

"The sun," I said. "We're out in the sun so much, unshielded, that it browns our skins or freckles them, or burns the living daylight out of us if we're not careful."

"Then you still live in touch of Earth," she said. "At Home we seldom ever—" Her words

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faded and I caught a capsuled feeling that might have been real cozy if you were born to it, but—"

"How come?" I asked. "What's with your world that you have to shield all the time?" I felt a pang for my pictured Eden . . .

"We don't *have* to," she said, "At least not any more— When we arrived at the New Home, we had to do a pretty thorough renovating job. We—of course this was my grandparent—wanted it as nearly like the Old Home as possible. We've done wonderfully well copying the vegetation and hills and valleys and streams, but —" Guilt tinged her words. "It's still a copy—nothing casual and . . . and thoughtless . . . By the time the New Home was livable, we'd got into the habit of shielding. It was just what one did automatically. I don't believe Mother has gone unshielded outside her own sleep-room in all her life. You just—don't—"

I sprawled my arm across the sand, feeling it grit against my skin. Real cozy . . . but—

She sighed. "One time—I was old enough to know better, they told me—one time I walked in the sun unshielded. I got muddy and got my hands dirty and tore my dress." She brought out the untidy words with an effort, as though using extreme slang at a very prim gathering. "And I tangled my hair so completely in a tree that I had to pull some of it out to get free." There was no bravado in her voice now. Now she was sharing with me one of the most precious of her memories—one not quite socially acceptable among her own.

I touched her hand lightly—since I do not communicate too freely without contact—and saw her.

She was stealing out of the house before dawn — strange house, strange landscape, strange world . . . easing the door shut, lifting quickly out into the grove below the house. Her flame of rebellion wasn't strange to me, though. I knew it too well myself. Then she dropped her shield. I gasped with her because I was feeling, as newly as though I were the First in a brand new Home, the movement of wind on my face, on my arms. I was even conscious of it streaming like tiny rivers between my fingers. I felt the soil beneath my hesistant feet, the soft packed clay, the outline of a leaf, the harsh stab of gravel, the granular sandiness of the water's edge. The splash of water against my legs was as sharp as a bite into lemon. And wetness! I had no idea that wetness was such an individual feeling. I can't remember when first I waded in water, or whether I ever felt wetness to know consciously, "This is wetness." The

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newness! It was like nothing I'd felt before.

Then suddenly there was the smell of crushed manzanita again and Salla's hand had moved from beneath mine.

"Mother's Questing for me," she whispered. "She has no idea I'm out here. She'd have a Quanic if she knew. I must go before she gets no answer from my room."

"When are you all coming out?" I asked.

"Tomorrow, I think," she said. "Laam will have to rest longer. He's our motiver, you know. It was exhausting bringing the ship into the atmosphere. More so than the whole rest of the trip. But the rest of us—"

"How many?" I whispered as she glided away from me and up the curve of the ship.

"Oh," she whispered back. "There's—" The door opened and she slid inside and it closed.

"Dream sweetly," I heard soundlessly, then astonishingly, the touch of a soft cheek against one of my cheeks, and the warm movement of lips against the other. I was startled and confused, though pleased, until with a laugh I realized that I had been caught between the mother's Questing and Salla's reply.

"Dream sweetly," I thought, and rolled myself in my blankets.

Something wakened me in the empty hours before dawn. I lay there feeling snatched out of sleep like a fish out of water, shivering in the interval between putting off sleep and putting on awakeness.

"I'm supposed to think," I thought dully. "Concentrated thinking."

So I thought. I thought of my People, biding their time, biding their time, waiting, waiting, walking when they could be flying. Think, *Think* what we could do if we stopped waiting and really got going. Think of Bethie, our Sensitive, in a medical center, reading the illnesses and ailments to the doctors. No more chance for patients to hide behind imaginary illnesses. No wrong diagnoses, no delay in identification of conditions. Of course there's only one Bethie and the few Sorters we have who could serve a little less effectively, but it would be a beginning.

Think of our Sorters, helping to straighten people out, able to search their deepest beings and pry the scabs off ancient cankers and wounds and let healing into the suffering intricacies of the mind.

Think of our ability to lift, to transport, to communicate, to *use* Earth instead of submitting to it. Hadn't Man been given dominion over Earth? Hadn't he forfeited it somewhere along the way? Couldn't we help point him back to the path again?

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I twisted with this concentrated restatement of all my questions. Why couldn't this all be so now, *now!*

But "No," say the Old Ones. "Wait," says Jemmy. "Not now," says Valancy.

"But look!" I wanted to yell. "They're headed for space! Trying to get there on a pogo stick. Look at Laam! He brought that ship to us from some far Homeland without lifting his hand, without gadgets in his comfortable motive-room. Take any of us. I, myself, could lift our pick-up high enough to need my shield to keep me breathing. I'll bet even I in one of those sealed, high flying planes could take it to the verge of space, just this side of the escape rim. And any motiver could take it over the rim and the hard part is over. Of course, though all of us can lift, we have only two motivers, but it would be a start!"

But "No," say the Old Ones. "Wait," says Jemmy, "Not now," says Valancy.

All right, so it would be doing violence to the scheme of things, grafting a third arm onto an organism designed for two. So the Earth ones will develop along our line some day—look at Peter and Dita and that Francher kid and Bethie. So someday when it is earned, they will have it. So—let's go, then! Let's find another Home. Let's take to space and leave them their Earth. Let's let them have their time—if they don't die of it first. Let's leave. Let's get out of this crumby joint. Let's go somewhere where we can be ourselves all the time, openly, unashamed!

I pounded my fists on the blanket, then ruefully wiped the flecks of sand from my lips and tongue and grunted a laugh at myself . . . I caught my breath, then relaxed.

"Okay, Davy," I said. "What are you doing out so early?"

"I haven't been to bed," said Davy, drifting out of the shadows. "Dad said I could try my scriber tonight. I just got it finished."

"That thing?" I laughed up at him. "What could you scribe at night?"

"Well," Davy sat down in the air above my blanket, rubbing his thumbs on the tiny box he was holding. "I thought it might be able to scribe dreams, but it won't. Not enough verbalizing in them. I checked my whole family and used up half my scribe tape. Gotta make some more today."

"Nasty break," I said, "Back to the drawing boards, boy."

"Oh, I don't know," said Davy, "I tried it on your dreams—" he flipped up out of my casual swipe at him— "But I couldn't get anything. So I ran a chill down your spine—"

"You rat," I said, too lazy to

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resent it very much. "That's why I woke up so hard and quick."

"Yup," he said, drifting back over me. "So I tried it on you awake. More concentrated thought patterns."

"Hey!" I sat up slowly. "Concentrated thought?"

"Take this last part." Davy drifted up again. There was a quacking gabble. "Ope!" he said, "Forgot the slowdown. Thoughts are fast. Now—"

And clearly and minutely, like a voice sometimes sounds from a telephone receiver, I heard myself yelling, "Let's leave, let's get out of this crumby joint—"

"Davy!" I yelled, launching myself upward, encumbered as I was with blankets.

"Watch it! Watch it!" he cried, holding the scriber away from me as we tumbled in the air. "Group interest! I claim group interest! With the ship here now—"

"Group interest, nothing!" I said as I finally got my hands on the scriber. "You're forgetting privacy of thought—and the penalty for violation thereof." I caught his flying thought and pushed the right area on the box to erase the record.

"Dagnab!" said Davy, disgruntled. "My first invention and you erase my first recording on it."

"Nasty break," I said. Then I tossed the box to him. "But say!" I reached up and pulled him down to me. "Obla! Think about Obla and this screwy gadget!"

"Yeah!" His face lighted up, then blanked as he was snatched along by the train of thought. "Yeah! Obla—no audible voice—" He had already forgotten me before the trees received him.

It wasn't that I had been ashamed of my thoughts. It was only that they sounded so—so naked, made audible. I stood there, my hands flattened against the beautiful ship and felt my conviction solidify. "Let's do. Let's leave. If there isn't room for us on this ship, we can build others. Let's find a real Home somewhere. Either find one or build one."

I think it was at that moment that I began to say goodbye to Earth, almost subconsciously beginning to sever the ties that bound me to it. Like the slow out-fanning of a lifting wing, the direction of my thoughts turned skyward. I lifted my eyes. *This time next year,* I thought, *I won't be watching morning lighting up Old Baldy.*

By midmorning the whole of the Group, including the whole Group from Bendo, which had been notified, was waiting on the hillside near the ship, relaxing in the sun that was relucant to leave Spring and launch into strenuous Summer. There was very little audible speech and not much gaiety. The ship brought back too

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much of the past and the dark streams of memory were coursing through the Group. I latched onto one stream and found only the shadows of the Crossing in it. *But the Home,* I interjected, *the Home before!*

Just then a glitter against the bulk of the ship drew our attention. The door was opening. There was a pause and then there were the four of them, Salla and her parents and another older fellow. The slight glintings of their personal shields were securely about them and, as they winced against the downpouring sun, their shields thickened above their heads and took on a deep blue tint.

The Oldest, his blind face turned to the ship, spoke on a Group stream.

"Welcome to the Group." His thought was organ-toned and cordial. "Thrice welcome among us. You are the first from the Home to follow us to Earth. We are eager for the news of our friends."

There was a sudden babble of thoughts. "Is Anna with you? Is Mark? Is Santhy? Is Bediah?"

"Wait, wait," the Father lifted his arms imploringly. "I cannot answer all of you at once except by saying—there are only the four of us in the ship."

"Four!" Almost, the astonished thought lifted an echo from Baldy.

"Why, yes," answered—he gave us his name—Shua. "My family and I and our motiver here, Laam."

"Then all the rest—?" Several of us slipped to our knees with the Sign trembling on our fingers.

"Oh no! No!" Shua was shocked. "No, we fared very well in our New Home. Almost all your friends await you eagerly. As you remember, ours was the Group living adjacent to yours on The Home. Our Group and two others reached our new Home. Why we brought this ship empty so we could take you all Home!"

"Home?" For a stunned moment the word hung almost visibly in the air above us.

Then, "Home!" The cry rose and swelled and broke to audibility as the whole Group took to the sky as one. Such a jubilant ecstatic cry it was that it shook an echo sufficient to frighten a pair of blue jays from a clump of pines on the flat.

"Why they must all think the way I do!" I thought, astonished, as I joined in the upsurge and the jubilant chorus of the wordless Homeward Song. Then I flatted a little as I wondered if any of them shared with me the sudden twinge of that odd pang I had felt before. I tucked it quickly away, deep enough so that only a Sorter would be able to find it, and quickly cradled the Francher Kid in my lifting—he hadn't learned to go much be-

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yond the tree tops yet, and the Group was leaving him behind. . . .

"There's four of them," I thought breathlessly at Obla. "Only four. They brought the ship to take us Home."

Obla turned her blind face to me. "To take us all? Just like that?"

"Well, yes," I replied, frowning a little. "I guess just like that —whatever that means."

"After all, I suppose castaways are always eager for rescue," said Obla. Then, gently mocking, "I suppose you're all packed?"

"I've been packed almost since I was born," I said. "Haven't I always been talking about getting out of this bind that holds us back?"

"You have," thought Obla. "Exhaustively talked about it. Put your hand out the window, Bram. Take a handful of sun." I did, filling my palm with the tingling brightness. "Pour it out." I tilted my hand and felt the warm flow of escaping light. "No more Earth sun ever again," she said. "Not ever!"

"Darn you, Obla, cut it out!" I cried.

"You weren't so entirely sure yourself, were you?" she asked. "Even after all your protestations. Even in spite of that big warm wonder growing inside you."

"Warm wonder?" Then I felt my face heat up. "Oh," I said awkwardly. "That's only natural interest in a stranger—a stranger from Home!" I felt excitement mounting. "Just think, Obla! From Home!"

"A stranger, from Home." Obla's thought was a little sad. "Listen to your words, Bram. A *stranger* from Home. When, ever, have People been strangers to one another?"

"You're playing with words now," I said. "Let me tell you the whole thing—"

I have used Obla for a sounding board ever since I can remember. I have no memory of her physically complete. I became conscious of her only after her disaster and mine. The same explosion that maimed her, took my parents. They were trying to get some Outsiders out of a crashed plane and didn't quite make it. Some of my most grandiose schemes have echoed hollow and empty against the listening receptiveness of Obla. And some of my shyest thoughts have grown to monumental strength with her uncritical acceptance of them. Somehow, when you hear your own ideas, crisply cut for transmission, they are stripped of anything extraneous and stand naked of pretentions, and *then* you can get a decent perspective on them.

"Poor child," she cut in when I told her of Salla's hair being

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caught. "Poor child, to feel that pain is a privilege—"

"Better that than having pain a way of life!" I flashed. "Who should know better than you?"

"Perhaps, perhaps," she said. "Who is to say which is better—to hunger and be fed, or to be fed so continuously that you never know hunger. Sometimes a little fasting is good for the soul. Think of a cold drink of water after an afternoon in the hayfield."

I shivered at the delicious recollection. "Well, *anyway* . . ." and I finished the account for her. I was almost out of the door before I suddenly realized that I hadn't mentioned Davy at all! I went back and told her. Before I was half through, her face twisted and her hair swirled protectively over it. When I finished, I stood there awkwardly, not knowing exactly what to do. Then I caught a faint echo of her thought. "A voice again . . ." I think a little of my contempt for gadgets died at the moment. Anything that could pleasure Obla . . .

I thought I was troubled about whether we should go or stay, until the afternoon I found all the Blends and In-Gathereds sitting together on the boulders above Cougar Creek. Dita was trailing the water from her bare toes and all the rest were concentrating on the falling of the drops as though there were some answer in them. The Francher Kid was making a sharp crystal scale out of their falling. I came openly so there was no thought of eavesdropping, but I don't think they were fully aware that I was there.

"But for me," Dita drew her knees up to her chest and clasped her wet feet in her hands, "for me it's different. You're Blends, or all of the People. But I'm all of Earth. My roots are anchored in this old rock. Think what it would mean to me to say goodbye to my world. Think back to the Crossing—" A ripple of discomfort moved through the Group. "You see? And yet, to stay—to watch the People go, to know them gone—" She laid her cheek against her knees.

The quick comfort of the others enveloped her, and Low moved to the boulder beside her.

"It'd be as bad for us to leave," he said. "Sure, we're of the People, but this is the only Home we've known. I didn't grow up in a Group. None of us did. All of our roots are firmly set here, too. To leave—"

"What has the new Home to offer that we don't have here?" Peter started a little whirlpool in the shallow stream below.

"Well—" Low stilled the whirlpool and spoke into a lengthening silence. "Ask Bram. He's all afire to blast off." He grinned over his shoulder at me.

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"The new Home is *our* world," I said, drifting over to them, gathering my scattered thoughts. "We would be among our own. No more need for concealment. No more trying to fit in where we don't fit. No more holding back, holding back when we could be doing so much."

I could feel the surge and swirl of thoughts around me — each person aligning himself to the vision of the Home. Without any further word, they all left the creek, absorbed in the problem. As they slowly scattered, there was not an echo of a thought. Everyone was shutting himself up with his own reactions.

All the peace and tranquillity of Cougar Canyon was gone. Oh, sure, the light still slanted brightly through the trees at dawn, the wind still stirred the branches in the hot quiet afternoons and occasionally whipped up little whirlwinds to dance the dried leaves in a brief flurry of action, and the slender new moon was cleanly bright in the evening sky . . . but it was all overlaid with a big question mark.

I couldn't settle to anything. Halfway through ripping a plank at the mill, I'd think, "Why bother? We'll be gone soon." And then the spasm of acute pleasure and anticipation would somehow turn to the pain of bereavement and I'd feel like clutching a handful of sawdust and—well—sobbing into it.

And late at night, changing the headgates to irrigate another alfalfa field, I'd kick the moss-slick wet boards and think exultantly, "When we get *there*, we won't have to go through this mumbo-jumbo. We'll rain the water where and when we want it!"

Then again, I'd lie in the edge of the hot sun, my head in the shade of the cottonwoods, and feel the deep soaking warmth to my very bone, smell the waiting, dusty smell of the afternoon, feel sleep wrapping itself around my thoughts and hear the sudden creaking cries of the red-winged blackbirds in the far fields, and suddenly *know* that I couldn't leave it. Couldn't give up Earth for anything or any place.

But there was Salla. Showing her Earth was like nothing you could ever imagine. For instance, it never occurred to her that things could hurt her. Like the day I found her half-way across Furnace flat, huddled under a pinion pine, cradling her bare feet in her hands and rocking with pain.

"Where are your shoes?" It was the first thing I could think of as I hunched beside her.

"Shoes?" She caught the picture from me, "Oh, shoes. My—sandals —are at the ship. I wanted to *feel* this world. We shield so much at home that I couldn't tell you

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a thing about textures there. But the sand was so good the first night, and water is wonderful, I thought this black, glowing smoothness and splinteredness would be a different sort of texture." She smiled ruefully. "It is. It's hot and—and—"

I supplied a word, "Hurty. I should think so. This shale flat heats up like a furnace this time of day. That's why its called Furnace Flat."

"I landed in the middle of it, running," she said. "I was so surprised that I didn't have sense enough to lift or shield."

"Let me see." I loosened her fingers and took one of her slender white feet in my hand. "Adonday Veeah!" I whistled. Carefully I picked off a few loose flakes of bloodstained shale. "You've practically blistered your feet too. Don't you know the sun can be vicious this time of day?"

"I know now," she said. She took her feet back and peered at the sole.

"Look!" she cried. "There's blood!"

"Yep," I said. "That's usual when you puncture your skin. Better come on back to the house and get those feet taken care of."

"Taken care of?"

"Sure. Antiseptic for the germs, salve for the burns. You won't go hunting for a day or two. Not with your feet, anyway."

"Can't we just no-bi and transgraph? It's so much simpler."

"Indubitably," I said, lifting sitting as she did and straightening up in the air above the path. "If I knew what you were talking about." We headed for the house.

"Well, at Home, the Healers—"

"This is Earth," I said. "We have no Healers as yet. Only insofar as our Sensitive can help out those who know about healing. It's mostly a do-it-yourself deal with us. And who knows, you might be allergic to us and sprout daylilies at every puncture. It'll probably worry your mother—"

"Mother—" There was a curious pause. "Mother is annoyed with me already. She feels that I'm definitely *undene*. She wishes she'd left me Home. She's afraid I'll never be the same again."

"*Undene?*" I asked, because Salla had sent out no clarification with the term.

"Yes," she said, and I caught at visualization after unfamiliar visualization until finally light began to dawn.

"Well! We don't exactly eat peas with our knives or wipe our noses on our sleeves! We can be pretty couth when we set our minds to it."

"I know, I know," she hastened to say, "but Mother—well, you know some mothers."

"Yes, I know," I said. "But if you never walk or climb or

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swim or anything like that, what do you do for fun?"

"It's not that we never do them," she said. "But seldom casually and unthinkingly. We're supposed to outgrow the need for childish activities like that," she said. "We're supposed to be capable of more intellectual pleasures."

"Like what?" I held the branches aside for her to descend to the kitchen door, and nearly kinked my shoulder trying to do that and open the door for her simultaneously. After several false starts and stops and a feeling of utter foolishness like when you try to dodge past a person who tries to dodge past you, we ended up at the kitchen table with Salla gasping at the smart of the merthiolate. "Like what?" I repeated.

"Hoosh! That's quite a sensation." She loosened her clutch on her ankles and relaxed under the soothing salve I spread on her reddened feet.

"Well, Mother's favorite—and she does it very well—is anticipating. She likes roses."

"So do I," I said, bewildered, "but I seldom anticipate in connection with them."

Salla laughed. I liked to hear her laugh. It was more nearly a musical phrase than a laugh. The Francher Kid, the first time he heard it, made a composition of it. Of course neither he nor I liked it very much when the other kids in the Canyon, revved it up and used it for a dance tune, but I must admit it had quite a beat . . . Well, anyway, Salla laughed.

"You know, for two people using the same words, we certainly come out at different comprehensions. No . . . what Mother likes is Anticipating a Rose. She chooses a bud that looks interesting—she knows all the finer distinctions—then she *makes* a rose, synthetic, as nearly like the real bud as she can. Then, for two or three days, she sees if she can anticipate every movement of the opening of the real rose by opening her synthetic simultaneously, or, if she's very adept, just barely ahead of the other." She laughed again. "It's one of our family stories—the time she chose a bud that did nothing for two days, then shivered to dust. Somehow it had been sprayed with *destro*. Mother's never quite got over the humiliation."

"Maybe I'm being *undene*," I said, "But I can't see spending two days watching a rose bud."

"And yet you spent a whole hour just looking at the sky last evening," said Salla. "And four of you spent hours last night receiving and displaying cards. You got quite emotional over it several times."

"Umm—well, yes," I said. "But that's different. A sunset like that, and the way Jemmy plays—" I

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caught the teasing in her eyes and we laughed together. Laughter needs no interpreter, at least not our laughter.

Salla took so much pleasure in sampling our world that, as is usual, I discovered things about our neighborhood that I hadn't known before. It was she who found the cave, because she was curious about the tiny trickle of water high on the slope of Baldy.

"Just a spring," I told her, as we looked up at the dark streak that marked a fold in the massive cliff.

"Just a spring," she mocked. "In this land of little water, is there such a thing as *just* a spring?"

"It's not worth anything," I protested, following her up into the air. "You can't even drink from it."

"It could ease a heart hunger though," she said. "The sight of wetness in an arid land."

"It can't even splash," I said, as we neared the streak.

"No," said Salla, holding her forefinger to the end of the moisture. "But it can grow things." Lightly she touched the minute little green plants that clung to the rock wall and the dampness.

"Pretty," I said, perfunctorily. "But look at the view from here."

We turned around, pressing our backs to the sheer cliff, and looked out over the vast stretches of red-to-purple-to-blue ranges of mountains, jutting fiercely naked or solidly forested or speckled with growth as far as we could see. And lazily, far away, a shaft of smelter smoke rose and bent almost at right angles as an upper current caught it and thinned it to haze. Below, fold after fold of the hills hugged protectively to themselves the tiny comings and goings and dwelling places of those who had lost themselves in the vastness.

"And yet," almost whispered Salla. "If you're lost in vast enough vastness, you find yourself—a different self, a self that has only Being and the Presence to contemplate."

"True," I said, breathing deeply of sun and pine and hot granite. "But not many reach that vastness. Most of us size our little worlds to hold enough distractions to keep us from having to contemplate Being and God."

There was a moment's deep silence as we let our own thoughts close the subject. Then Salla lifted and I started down.

"Hey!" I called, "That's up!"

"I know it," she called. "And that's down! I still haven't found the spring!"

So I lifted too, grumbling at the stubborness of women, and arrived even with Salla just as she perched tentatively on a sharp spur of rock on the edge of the vegetation-covered gash that was the beginning of the oozing wetness. She looked straight down

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the dizzy thousands of feet below us.

"What beautiful downness!" she said, pleasured.

"If you were afraid of heights—" I suggested.

She looked at me quickly. "*Are* some people?" she asked, "Really?"

"Some are," I said, "I read one, one time. Would you care to try the texture of *that?*" And I created for her the horrified, frantic, dying terror of an Outsider friend of mine who hardly dares look out of a second story window.

"Oh, no!" She paled and clung to the scanty draping of vines and branches of the cleft. "No more! No more!"

"I'm sorry," I said. "But it *is* a different sort of emotion. I think of it every time I read—'neither height nor depth nor any other creature.' Height to my friend is a creature — a horrible hovering destroyer waiting to pounce on him."

"It's too bad," said Salla, "that he doesn't remember to go on to the next phase, and learn to lose his fear—"

By quick common consent we switched subjects in mid-air.

"This is the source," I said. "Satisfied?"

"No." She groped among the vines. "I want to see a trickle trickle, and a drop drop from the beginning." She burrowed deeper.

Rolling my eyes to heaven for patience, I helped her hold back the vines. She reached for the next layer—and suddenly wasn't there.

"Salla!" I scrabbled at the vines. "Salla!"

"H-h-here." I caught her subvocal answer.

"Talk!" I said, as felt her thought melt out of my consciousness.

"I *am* talking!" Her reply broke to audibility on the last word. "And I'm sitting in some awfully cold, wet water. Do come in."

I squirmed cautiously through the narrow cleft into the darkness, and stumbled to my knees in icy water almost waist deep.

"It's dark," whispered Salla, and her voice ran huskily around the place.

"Wait for your eyes to change," I whispered back, and, groping through the water caught her hand and clung to it. But even after a breathless sort of pause, our eyes could not pick up enough light to see by—only faint green shimmer where the cleft was.

"Had enough?" I asked. "Is this trickly and drippy enough?" I lifted our hands and the water sluiced off our elbows.

"I want to see," she protested.

"Matches," I said, "are inoperative when they're wet. Flashlight have I none. Suggestions?"

"Well, no," she said. "You don't

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have any Glowers living here, do you?"

"Since the word rings no bell, I guess not," I said. "But, say!" I dropped her hand and, rising to my knees, fumbled for my pocket. "Dita taught me—or tried to after Valancy told her how-come —" I broke off, immersed in the problem of trying to get a hand into and out of the pocket of skin-tight wet levis.

"I know I'm an Outlander," said Salla plaintively, "But I thought I had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of your language."

"Dita's the Outsider that we found with Low. She's got some Gifts and Persuasions none of us have. There!" I grunted, and settled back in the water. "Now if I can remember."

I held the thin dime between my fingers and shifted all those multiples of mental gears that are so complicated until you work your way through their complexity to the underlying simplicity. I concentrated my whole self on that little disc of metal. There was a sudden blinding spurt of light. Salla cried out and I damped the light quickly to a more practical level.

"I did it!" I cried. "I glowed it first thing, this time! It took me half an hour last time to get a spark!"

Salla was looking in wonder at the tiny globe of brilliance in my hand. "And an Outsider can do *that*?"

"Can do!" I said, suddenly very proud of our Outsiders. "And so can I, now! There you are, Ma'am," I twanged. "Yore light, yore cave—look to yore little heart's content."

I don't suppose it was much as caves go. The floor was sand, pale, granular, almost sugar-like. The pool—out of which we both dripped as soon as we sighted dry land—had no apparent source, but stayed always at the same level in spite of the slender flow that streaked the cliff. The roof was about twice my height and pool was no farther than that across. The walls curved protectively close around the water. At first glance there was nothing special about the cave. There weren't even any stalactites or -mites—just the sand and the quiet pool shimmering a little in the light of the glowed coin.

"Well!" Salla sighed happily as she pushed back her heavy hair with wet hands. "This is where it begins."

"Yes," I said, closing my hand around the dime and watching the light spray between my fingers. "Wetly, I might point out."

Salla was scrambling across the sand on all fours.

"It's high enough to stand," I said, following her.

"I'm being a cave creature," She smiled back over her shoul-

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der. "Not a human surveying a kingdom. It looks different from down here."

"Okay, troglodyte," I said. "How does it look down there?"

"Marvelous!" Salla's voice was very soft. "Bring the light and look!"

We lay on our stomachs and peered into the tiny tunnel, hardly a foot across, that Salla had found. I focused the light down the narrow passageway. The whole thing was a lacy network of delicate crystals, white, clear, rosy and pale green, so fragile that I held my breath lest they break. The longer I looked, the more wonder I saw—miniature forests of snowflake-like laciness, flights of fairy steps, castles and spires, flowers terraced up gentle hillsides and branches of blossoms almost alive enough to sway. An arm's length down the tunnel a quietly bright pool reflected the perfection around it to double the enchantment.

Salla and I looked at each other, our faces so close together that we were mirrored in one another's eyes—eyes that stated and reaffirmed: *Ours—no one else in all the Universe shares this spot with us.*

Wordlessly we sat back on the sand. I don't know about Salla, but I was having a little difficulty with my breathing, because, for some odd reason, it seemed necessary to hold my breath to shield from being as easily read as a child.

"Let's leave the light," whispered Salla. "It'll stay lighted without you, won't it?"

"Yeah," I said. "Indefinitely."

"Leave it by the little cave," she said. "Then we'll know it's always lighted and lovely."

We edged our way out of the cleft in the cliff and hovered there for a minute, laughing at our bedraggled appearance. Then we headed for home and dry clothes.

"I wish Obla could see the cave," I said impulsively. Then wished I hadn't because I caught Salla's immediate displeased protest.

"I mean," I said awkwardly, "She never gets to see—" I broke off. After all she wouldn't be able to see any better if she were there. I would have to be her eyes.

"Obla." Salla wasn't vocalizing now. "She's very near to you."

"She's almost my second self," I said.

"A relative?"

"No," I said, "Only as souls are related."

"I can feel her in your thoughts so often," said Salla. "And yet—have I ever met her?"

"No," I said. "She doesn't meet people." I was holding in my mind the clean, uncluttered strength of Obla; then again I caught Salla's distressed protest

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and her feeling of being excluded, before she shielded. Still I hesitated. I didn't want to share. Obla was more an expression of myself than a separate person. An expression that was hidden and precious. I was afraid to share — afraid that it might be like touching a finger to a fragile chemical fern in the little tunnel, that there wouldn't even be a ping before the perfection shivered to a shapeless powder.

Two weeks after the ship arrived, a general Group meeting was called. We all gathered on the flat around the ship. It looked like a field day at first, with the flat filled with laughing, lifting children playing tag above the heads of the more sedate elders. The kids my age clustered at one side, tugged towards playing tag, too, but restrained because after all you do outgrow some things, when people are looking. I sat there with them, feeling an emptiness beside me. Salla was with her parents.

The Oldest was not there. He was at home struggling to contain his being in the broken body that was becoming more and more a dissolving prison. So Jemmy called us to attention.

"Long drawn periods of indecision are not good," he said without preliminary. "The ship has been here two weeks. We have all faced our problem—to go or to stay. There are many of us who have not yet come to a decision. This we must do soon. The ship will Up a week from today. To help us decide, we are now open to *brief* statements pro or con."

There was an odd tightening feeling as the whole Group flowed into a common thought stream and became a single unit instead of a mass of individuals.

"I will go." It was the thought of the Oldest from his bed back in the Canyon. "The New Home has the means to help me, so that the years yet allotted to me may be nearly painless. Since the Crossing—" He broke off, flashing an amused, " 'Brief!' "

"I will stay." It was the voice of one of the young girls from Bendo. "We have only started to make Bendo a place fit to live in. I like beginnings. The New Home sounds finished, to me."

"I don't want to go away," piped a very young voice. "My radishes are just coming up and I hafta water them all the time. They'd die if I left." Amusement rippled through the group and relaxed us.

"I'll go." It was Matt, called back from Tech by the ship's arrival. "In the Home, my field of specialization has developed far beyond what we have at Tech or anywhere else. But I'm coming back."

"There can be no free and easy passage back and forth between the Home and Earth," warned

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Jemmy, "For a number of very valid reasons."

"I'll chance it," said Matt. "I'll make it back."

"I'm staying," said the Francher Kid. "Here on Earth we're different with a plus. There we'd be different with a minus. What we can do and do well, won't be special there. I don't want to go where I'd be making ABC songs. I want my music to go on being big."

"I'm going," said Jake, his voice mocking as usual. "I'm through horsing around. I'm going to become a solid citizen. But I want to go in for—" his verbalization stopped, and all I could comprehend was an angular sort of concept wound with time and space as with serpentine. I saw my own blankness on the faces around me, and felt a little less stupid. "See," said Jake. "That's what I've been having on the tip of my mind for a long time. Shua tells me they've got a fair beginning on it there. *I'm* willing to ABC it for a while for a chance at something like that."

I cleared my throat. Here was my chance to broadcast to the whole Group what I intended to do! Apparently I was the only one seeing the situation clearly enough. "I . . ."

It was as though I'd stepped into a dense fog bank. I felt as though I'd gone blind and dumb at one stroke. I had a feeling of being torn like a piece of paper. I lost all my breath as I became vividly conscious of my actual thoughts. *I didn't want to go!* I was snatched into a mad whirlpool of thoughts at this realization. How could I stay after all I'd said? How could I go and know Earth no more? How could I stay and let Salla go? How could I go and leave Obla behind? Dimly I heard someone else's voice finishing:

". . . because Home or no Home, *this* is Home to me!"

I closed my gaping, wordless mouth and wet my dry lips. I could see again—see the Group slowly dissolving – the Bendo Group gathering together under the trees, the rest drifting away from the flat. Low leaned across the rock. "S'matter, feller?" he laughed. "Cat got your tongue? I expected a blast of eloquence from you that'd push the whole Group up the gang-plank."

"Bram's bashful!" teased Dita. "He doesn't like to make his convictions known!"

I tried a sort of smile. "Pity me, people," I said. "Before you stands a creature shorn of convictions, nekkid as a jay bird in the cold winds of indecision."

"Fresh out of long-johns," said Peter, sobering. "But there's plenty of sympathy available."

"Thanks," I said. "Noted and appreciated."

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I couldn't take my new doubt and indecision, the new tumult and pain to Obla—not when she was so much a part of it, so I took them up into the hills. I perched like a brooding buzzard on the stone spur outside the little cave, high above the Canyon. Wildly, until my throat ached and my voice croaked, I railed against this world and its limitations. Hoarsely I whispered over all the lets and hindrances that plagued us—that plagued me. And, infuriatingly, the world and all its echos placidly paced my every argument with solid rebuttal. I was hearing with both ears now, one for my own voice, one for the world's reply. And my voice got fainter and fainter and Earth's voice wasn't a whisper any more.

"Nothing is the way it should be!" I hoarsely yelled my last weary assault at the evening sky.

"And never will be, short of eternity," replied the streak of sunset crimson.

"But we could do so much more—"

"Whoever heard of bread made only of leaven?" replied the first evening star.

"We're being wasted," I whispered.

"So is the wheat when it's broadcast in the field," answered the fringe of pines on the crest of a far hill.

"But Salla will go. She'll be gone—"

And nothing answered—only the wind cried and a single piece of dislodged gravel rattled down into the darkness.

"Salla!" I cried, "Salla will be gone! Answer *that* one if you can!" But the world was through with answers. The wind became very busy humming through the dusk.

"Answer me!" I had only a whisper left.

"I will." The voice was very soft, but it shook me like a blast of lightning. "I can answer." Salla eased lightly down on the spur beside me. "Salla is staying."

"Salla!" I could only clutch the rock and stare.

"Mother had a *quanic* when I told her," smiled Salla, easing the tight, uncomfortable emotion. "I told her I needed a research paper to finish my Level requirements and that this would be just perfect for it.

"She said I was too young to know my own mind. I said finishing high in my Level would be quite a feather in her cap—if you'll pardon the provincialism. And she said she didn't even know your parents." Salla colored, her eyes wavering. "I told her there had been no Word between us. That we were not Two-ing. Yet. Much."

"It doesn't have to be now!" I cried, grabbing both her hands. "Oh, Salla! Now we can afford to wait!" And I yanked her off

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the spur into the maddest, wildest flight of my life. Like a couple of crazy things, we split and resplit the air above Baldy, soaring and diving like drunken lightning. But all the time part of us was moving so far, so fast, another part of us was talking quietly together, planning, wondering, rejoicing, as serenely as if we were back in the cave again, seeing each other in quiet, reflective eyes. Finally darkness closed in entirely and we leaned exhausted against each other, drifting slowly towards the Canyon floor.

"Obla," I said, "Let's go tell Obla." There was no need to shield any part of my life from Salla any more. In fact there was a need to make it a cohesive whole, complete with both Obla and Salla.

Obla's windows were dark. That meant no one was visiting her. She would be alone. I rapped lightly on the door—my own particular rap.

"Bram? Come in!" I caught welcome from Obla.

"I brought Salla," I said. "Let me turn the light on." I stepped in.

"Wait—"

But simultaneously with her cry, I flipped the light switch.

"Salla," I started, "This is—"

Salla screamed and threw her arm across her eyes, a sudden over-flooding of horrified revulsion choked the room and Obla was fluttering in the far upper corner of the room—hiding—hiding herself behind the agonized swirl of her hair, her broken body in the twisting of her white gown, pressing itself to the walls, struggling for escape, her startled physical and mental anguish moaning almost audibly around us.

I grabbed Salla and yanked her out of the room, snapping the light off as we went. I dragged her out to the edge of the yard where the canyon walls shot upwards. I flung her against the sandstone wall. She turned and hid her face against the rock, sobbing. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

"How could you!" I gritted between my teeth, outraged anger thickening my words. "It *that* the kind of people the Home is turning out now? Counting arms and legs and eyes more than the person?" Her tumbling hair whipped across my chin. "Permitting rejection and disgust for any living soul? Aren't you taught even common kindness and compassion?" I wanted to hit her—to hit anything solid to protest this unthinkable thing that had been done to Obla—this unhealable wounding.

Salla snatched herself out of my grasp and hovered just out of reach, wet eyes glaring angrily down at me.

"It's your fault, too!" she snapped, tears flowing. "I'd have

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died rather than do a thing like that to Obla or anyone else—if I had known! You didn't tell me. You never visualized her that way—only strength and beauty and wholeness!"

"Why not!" I shot back angrily, lifting level with her. "That's the only way I ever see her any more. And trying to shift the blame—"

"It *is* your fault! Oh Bram!" And she was crying in my arms. When she could speak again between sniffs and hiccoughs, she said, "We don't have people like that at Home. I mean, I never saw a—an incomplete person. I never saw scars and mutilation. Don't you see, Bram. I was holding myself ready to receive her, completely—because she was part of you. And then to find myself embracing—" She choked. "Look," she went on, "Look, Bram, we have transgraph and—and regeneration—and *no* one ever stays unfinished."

I let go of her slowly, lost in wonder. "Regeneration? Transgraph?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Salla. "She can have back her legs. She can have arms again. She can have her beautiful face again. She may even get back her eyes and her voice, though I don't know for sure about that. She can be Obla again, instead of a dark prison for Obla."

"No one told us."

"No one asked."

"Common concern."

"I'll ask then. Have you any *dobic* children? And cases of *Cazerinea*? Any *Trimorph Semia*? It's not that we don't want to ask. How are we to know *what* to ask? We've never even heard of a—a basket case." She took the word from me. "It just didn't occur to us to ask."

"I'm sorry," I said, drying her eyes with the palms of my hands, lacking anything better. "I should have told you." My words were but scant surface indications of my deep abject apology.

"Come," she said, pulling away from me. "We must go to Obla—now—right now."

It was Salla who finally coaxed Obla back down to her bed. It was Salla who persuaded the frantic twining hair to untwist. It was Salla who held the broken, weeping face against her slight young shoulder and poured the healing balms of her sorrow and understanding over Obla's wounds. As it was Salla who told Obla of what The Home held for her. Told her and told her and told her, until Obla finally believed.

All three of us were limp and weary by then, and all three content just to sit for a minute, so the explosion of Davy into the room was twice the shock it ordinarily would have been.

"Hi, Bram! Hi, Salla! Hey, Obla! I got it fixed now. It won't

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hiss on the S's and more and you can trip the playback yourself. Here." He plopped onto her pillow the little cube I recognized as his scriber. "Try it out. Go on. Try it out on Bram."

Obla turned her face until her cheek felt the cube. Salla looked at me in wonderment and then at Obla. There was a brief pause and then a slight click and I heard, tiny but distinct, the first audible word I'd ever heard from Obla.

"Bram! Oh, Bram! Now I can go with you. I won't be left behind. And when we get to the Home, I'll be whole again! Whole again!"

Through my shock I heard Davy say, "You didn't even use one S, Obla! Say something S-y, so's I can check it."

Obla thought I was going to the Home! She expected me to go with her! She didn't know I'd decided to stay. That *we* were going to stay. I met Salla's eyes. Our communication was quick and complete before the small voice said, "Salla, my sweet sister! I trust that's sufficiently S-y!" And I heard Obla's laugh for the first time.

So, somewhere way back there, there is a tiny cave with a dime glowing in it, keeping in trust a preciousness between Salla and me—a candle in the window of memory. Somewhere way back there are the sights and sounds, the smells and tastes, the homeness of Earth. For a while I have turned my back on the Promised Land. For our Jordan was crossed those long years ago. My trouble was that I thought that wherever I looked, just because *I* did the looking, was the goal ahead. But all the time, the Crossing, simmering in the light of memory, had been something completed, not something yet to reach. My yearning for The Home must have been a little of the old hunger for the Flesh Pots that haunts any pioneering effort.

And Salla— Well, sometimes when I'm not looking, she looks at me and then at Obla. And sometimes when she isn't looking, I look at her and then at Obla. Obla has no eyes, but sometimes when we aren't looking, she looks at me and then at Salla.

Things will happen to all three of us before Earth swells again in the portholes, but whatever happens, Earth *will* swell in the portholes again—at least for me. And *then* I will truly be coming Home.

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Here is a multiplicity of cats and grey-herringboned men . . . in a scherzo on a science fiction theme by the brilliant and controversial author of CITIZEN TOM PAINE, FREEDOM ROAD *and the new bestseller* SPARTACUS. *As far as we know, this is Mr. Fast's first science fiction—we devoutly hope it is not his last.*

Of Time and Cats

by Howard Fast

AT LEAST, IF IT MAKES NO SENSE at all, it explains about the cats. There was a note in the *Times* today about the pound; they have put away four times the average number of cats, and it keeps getting worse. It will continue to get worse and worse, no doubt, but cats are not as bad as some things.

To explain it, after I had convinced myself that I was in my right mind, I telephoned my wife. Some say that there is actually no way of convincing yourself that you are in your right mind, but I don't go along with that. At least I was as sane as I was a week before.

"Where are you?" my wife demanded. "Why are you telephoning—why don't you come up?"

"Because I am downtown at the Waldorf."

"Oh no—no. You are downstairs where I left you less than three minutes ago."

"That is not me—not myself, do you understand?"

"No."

I waited a while, and she waited too. Finally, I said, "No, I guess you don't."

"I also saw you dodge around the corner of 63rd Street," she added. "Were you playing games?"

"Well—"

"Yes?"

"That wasn't me either. Do you think I'm out of my mind? I mean, do you think I've had a breakdown or something like that?"

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"No," my wife said. "You're not the breakdown type."

"Well, what do you think?"

"I'm reserving opinions," my wife said.

"Thank you. I still love you. When you saw me downstairs a few minutes ago, what was I wearing?"

"Don't you know?" She seemed shaken for the first time.

"I know. But I want you to tell me. Is that asking so much? Just tell me."

"All right. I'll tell you. The gray herringbone."

"Ah," I said. "Now I will hold the wire, and you go to my closet and tell me what you see there."

"You're not drunk. I've seen you drunk, and you don't act this way. I will not go to the closet. You come home and we'll decide whether to call a doctor or not."

"Please," I begged her. "Please. I am asking a small thing. We have been married twelve years. It has been give and take, the best with the worst. But we came through. Now all I am asking is that you go—"

"All right," she said shortly. "I'll humor you. I will go to your closet. Just hold on."

I waited while she went and returned. She picked up the phone again, but said nothing.

"Well?"

She sighed and admitted that she had gone to the closet.

"And you saw it there?"

"Your gray suit?"

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Gray herringbone. My one gray suit. I have brown, blue and Oxford. I have two sport jackets and three pairs of flannel trousers. But only one gray suit—gray herringbone. Right?"

"Gray herringbone," she said weakly. "But maybe you bought another?"

"Why?"

"How should I know why? You like gray herringbone, I suppose."

"No, I didn't buy another. I give you my word of honor. Alice, I love you. We have been married twelve years. I'm a solid character as such things go. Not flighty. Not even romantic, as you have remarked."

"You are romantic enough," she said flatly.

"You know what I mean. I did not buy another gray suit. It is the same gray suit."

"In two places at the same time?"

"Yes."

"Oh?"

There was a long, long pause then, until finally I said, "Now will you do as I say, even if it makes no sense?"

She paused and sighed again. "Yes."

"Good. It is now two-fifteen. Shortly before three o'clock, Professor Dunbar will call and tell you some rubbish about his cat

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and then ask for me. Tell him to go to hell. Then get a cab down here to the Waldorf. I'm in Room 1121."

"Bob," she said uncertainly, "just that way—go to hell? He is the head of your department."

"Well, not in so many words. Do it your own way. Then come straight here. Yes—one thing more. If you see me anywhere, ignore me. Do you understand—no matter what. Ignore me. Don't talk to me."

"Oh? Yes—of course. If I see you anywhere, I ignore you. And if I see you, you'll be wearing the gray herringbone?"

"Yes," I said, "And will you do as I say?"

"Oh, yes—yes. Of course."

And strangely enough, she did. There are wives and wives; I like mine. I sat in that room (the least expensive, eight dollars a day) and waited and tried to think about something no one should ever have to think about, and at exactly 3:20, there was a knock at the door, and I opened it, and there was Alice. She was a little pale, a little shaken, but still very nice to look at and standing and walking on her own feet.

I kissed her, and she returned the kiss, but told me it was only because I had the blue suit on. Not a chance with the gray suit, she said; and then asked me seriously whether we could be dreaming?

"Not both of us," I said. "Either you or me. But this isn't a dream. Why do you ask? Did you see me?"

She nodded. "Let me sit down first." She sat down and looked at me with a curious smile on her face.

"You did see me?" I asked.

"Oh, yes—yes, I saw you."

"Where?"

"On the corner of 58th Street."

"Did I see you?"

"No, I don't think so. I was in a cab. But not in the singular, either. You would have to say, 'Did we see you?' There were three of you."

"All in gray herringbone?"

"Every one of you."

I had a bottle of brandy, and I poured a tot for each of us, and I drank mine down and then so did Alice. Then she asked me what I was doing, and I told her I was taking my pulse.

"You would think the rooms would be nicer than this in the Waldorf," she said, "even for eight dollars a day. If I was hiding, I wouldn't hide in the Waldorf. I'd go downtown to a flophouse, like they do in the stories, for fifty cents a day. How is your pulse?"

"Eighty. I'm not hiding."

"Eighty is good, isn't it?"

"It's all right. It's normal," I pointed out. "We're both normal. We're plain people with common sense."

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"Yes?"

"How was I? I mean, was I—"

"We. Say *we*. There were three of you. And I might as well tell you, I saw you outside the house. That makes four of you. I got the cab before you caught me, and when I looked back, there was another one of you. Five of you."

"Oh, my God!"

"Yes, indeed, and you can thank your stars that I am not the hysterical type. How many of you are there, if I may ask?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "Maybe fifty—maybe a hundred—maybe five hundred. I just don't know."

"You mean New York is full of you," Alice nodded. "When I was a little girl, I used to read *Alice in Wonderland* and pretend it was me. Now I don't have to pretend."

"No, I guess you don't. Tell me, Alice—just one or two things more—and then I'll try to explain."

I poured her another brandy and she drank it down neat, and said, "Oh, fine. I want to hear you explain about this."

"Yes, yes, naturally you do. And I'm going to—that is as much as I understand, I'm going to, I am indeed—"

"You are babbling," Alice interrupted, not without sympathy.

"I am, aren't I? Well, there you are. What I meant is—when you saw the three of me, was I—were we quarrelling, angry or what?"

"Oh, no, getting along fine. Just so deep in a discussion you didn't realize you had stopped traffic. Three of you are triplets, not any kind of triplets, but bald, forty-year old college-professor type triplets, identical of course, and dressed in that gray herringbone that all of the city must be talking about—oh, yes, and the sleeveless cashmere instead of a vest and the bright green bow-tie—"

"I don't see how you can laugh at something like this."

"I have problems of my own sanity," Alice said. "Would you like another nip? Yes—I told Dunbar to go to hell, just as you advised me to."

She poured the brandy for me, and her hand didn't shake. Don't ever tell me that any man knows the woman he is married to, not in twelve years and not in twenty years—not unless something happens that can't happen, and most people live their lives without that.

"He called?"

"Yes. You said he would."

"But I didn't believe he would. What time?"

"Ten minutes to three, exactly. I checked the time."

"Yes. What did he say — for God's sake, Alice, what did he say?"

"If you had only said it was important, I would have listened more carefully."

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"But you did listen — please. Alice!"

"The trouble is, he doesn't talk English even at best, and he was very excited. He's building some kind of a silly machine in his basement — a field deviator or something of that sort—"

"I know. I know what he's trying to do."

"Then perhaps you can tell me."

"I will, I will," I pleaded. "I don't quite understand it myself, to tell you the truth. He has some notion that space can be warped or bent—no, that doesn't do it, but something like that. Knotted, perhaps. A tiny corner of it twisted into a knot—"

"You're not making any sense at all, Bob. I think you're excited. I think you're upset."

"Yes I'm upset! Going out of my mind! God damn it, Alice—what did he say?"

"That's better," Alice nodded. "I think it's good for you to get angry, a sort of safety valve."

"What did he say?"

"He said that his cat walked into the—what would it be—between two electrodes or something like electrodes?"

"A vortex?"

"Perhaps. Whatever it is, his cat walked into it and disappeared. Poof—just like that. No cat. So he tried it on himself—he has the emotional stability of a six year old, if you ask me—and nothing at all happened. So he wants you to get in your car and get right over to his basement and let him know what you make of it."

"And?"

"I don't know," Alice frowned. "He assured me that it had nothing to do with atomic disintegration or anything of that sort or there would have been a dreadful explosion and he wouldn't have been talking to me at all. I think he thought that was a joke —he laughed. The kind of humor a professor uses with his students. Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't mind me at all. You can't hurt my feelings now."

"And I told him to go to hell. Not in those words—I told him you were spending the night with your brother in Hartford, and when he wanted your brother's telephone number, I said it had been temporarily disconnected, so he got the address and sent you a wire there, or he said he would. Now it's your turn."

"Now it's my turn," I repeated, and I went over to the window and looked down.

"Looking for yourself?" Alice wanted to know.

"That's a damn poor joke."

"Sorry. Really, I am, Bob." She got up and came over to me and put her arm through mine. "I know you have trouble. Why don't you try to tell me."

"Will you believe me?"

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"I think I can believe anything, now."

"Good. Now sit down again. I want you to sit down and look at me." She did this dutifully, and rested her elbow on the arm of the chair, her chin on her knuckles, and looked at me. "I am your husband, Robert Clyde Bottman. Right?"

"I accept that."

"And all those others you saw today—they were also me, your husband, Robert Clyde Bottman—right?"

She nodded.

"What do you make of it?"

"Oh, no—not me. As soon as I try to make anything out of it, I'll go screaming mad. What do you make of it?"

"I'll tell you," I said. "This morning, at ten-thirty, you left the house to go shopping downtown. I was correcting papers. Shortly after you left, the bell rang. I opened the door—and there I was. The first one."

"Gray herringbone, you mean."

"Exactly. And I wasn't too surprised at first. He looked familiar, but nobody really knows what they look like to someone else. The worst moment came when I discovered that it was myself—not an imitation, not a copy, not a fraud, not proof that the devil actually exists, but myself. It was me. I was me. It was me. We both were Robert Clyde Bottman. We both were the real thing. Do you understand?"

For the first time, there was fear and horror in my wife's face as she shook her head and said, "No—I don't, Bob."

"Listen," I went on. "He explained it to me. Or I explained it to me, take your choice. And while he was explaining, the doorbell rang, and I opened it, and there I was again. Three of us now. Then we began to fight it out philosophically, and the doorbell rang again. Four of us—"

"Bob, tell me!"

"Yes—now listen. Take today in terms of time. What happens to it when tomorrow comes?"

"Oh, it's yesterday, and stop that, Bob. Tell me what happened. I can't stand much more of this."

"And I'm trying to tell you, believe me, Alice. But first we have to talk about time. What is time?"

"Bob, I don't know what time is. Time is time. It passes."

"And I don't know any more than that, when you come right down to it. And neither does anyone else. But it's been a philosophical football for ages. I walk across this room. Time passes. I have been in a number of places just in this room, all connected by my actual physical being. What happened to me as I was two minutes ago? I was. I cease to exist. I reappear."

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"Nonsense," Alice snorted. "You're here all the time."

"Because I am connected with myself in terms of time. Suppose Time is an aspect of motion. No motion, no time. If you will, think of a path in terms of motion. You move along it—everything we are conscious of moves in parallel terms. But nothing disappears—it is all there always, yesterday, tomorrow, a million years from now—a reality that we are conscious of only in the flickering transition of now—this moment, this instant."

"I don't understand that at all, and I don't believe it either," Alice said. "It this some new kismet—fate, a future ordained for us?"

"No, no," I said impatiently. "It's not that. The path isn't fixed. It's fluid, it changes all the time. But we can't sit and argue about it, because we're moving along it. And I have to tell you before we go too far. Those other myselfs—"

"Just call them gray herringbone," Alice said weakly.

"Very well, gray herringbone. They told me what happened today."

"Before it happened?"

"Before it happened and after it happened. That makes no difference. It's a paradox. That's why this sort of thing can't be handled by the mental equipment we have. There's no room for paradox. The most illogical man is still logical in terms of paradox. Today happened to me. I corrected the papers. You came home. Professor Dunbar telephoned and told me about the cat. I rushed over to his place. I took a panel of transistors with me, found where his circuit burned out, rewired it. You see, I had wired it originally. I was trembling with excitement then—"

"*You* were trembling with excitement?" Alice said.

"Yes. Well, I react to different things. You can't imagine how exciting this was — actually to warp space, even if a tiny bit of it. I wasn't thinking about time then. You see, I had picked up the professor's cat outside his door, and I brought it in with me. There were three cats there, but I didn't think twice about that. I picked up the one on the doorstep and brought it in. The professor was delighted. We decided that a space-warp had placed the cat outside the house. So when I hooked in the transistors and threw the power, I stepped between the electrodes myself. What could be more natural?"

"Nothing," Alice said. "Oh — nothing at all. Very natural, only they give the younger generations to you to be taught."

"And that was five PM, today."

"And now it's four-thirty PM," Alice shrugged. "Today was, but it isn't yet. For God's sake, Bob,

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I am a woman. Talk sense to me!"

"I am trying to. You must accept it—don't think about it, accept it. The warp was in time, maybe in space too, maybe the two are inseparable. We only had three hundred amps—a very slight effect, a tiny loop or twist in time, and then it snapped back. But the damage was done. My own particular time belt now had a five hour loop in it. In other words, it was repeating itself, endlessly, eternally, and each time it repeated, I was stranded here—no, I don't make sense, do I?"

"I'm afraid not," Alice agreed sadly. "You said it happened."

"It did. But I was pushed back to before it happened. I went straight to the apartment. I rang the bell. I opened the door and let myself in. I told myself—"

"Stop that!" Alice cried. "Stop talking about yourself. Say gray herringbone, if you must."

"All right. Gray herringbone, and he told me what had happened. Heaven knows how many times the loop had repeated already—"

"Wouldn't you know if it repeated?"

"How could I know? My own consciousness is only for now—not for yesterday, not for tomorrow. How could I know?"

Alice shook her head dumbly.

"Anyway," I continued desperately, "today, my today, our today, this morning, I decided to stop it. I had to stop it. I would go insane, the whole world would go insane if I didn't stop it. But they — the gray herringbones — they didn't want me to stop it."

"Why?"

"Because they were afraid. They were afraid that they would die. They want to live as much as I do. I am the first me, and therefore the real me; but they are also me—different moments of consciousness in me—but they are me. But they couldn't stop me. They couldn't interfere with me. When I told them to get out, they had to go. If they interfered, it might mean death for them too. So they left. But some of them watched downstairs—and some in other places, and all of them myself. Do you wonder that I am half insane?"

"All right, my dear," Alice said gently. "What did you do then?"

"I put on the blue suit, not the gray one. I climbed down the fire-escape, through the house opposite ours, hailed a cab, and checked in here at the hotel."

"But if what you say is true," Alice said, beginning to share my own fear and horror, "any one of you—of the gray herringbone—can go to Dunbar instead—"

I nodded. "I thought of that. I'm not certain it would work that way. But to make sure, I took the transistor panel with me. It would take at least ten hours of work and a good electronics shop

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to duplicate it. They can repair the circuit—and maybe it will be enough power for a cat, but not for a man. I can swear that. Not for a man—"

"But if they do?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just don't know. Nothing will ever again be the way it was. How many of me will the world contain? I don't know—"

"And if you stop it, Bob?" Whether she understood me or not, she believed me. Her eyes said that; the fear was deep and wet and sick in her eyes.

"I can't answer that," I shrugged. "I don't know. We just scraped at a great mystery. I don't know. All we can do it sit and wait. Less than a half hour to five o'clock, so it's not too long to wait."

Then we waited. At first we tried to talk, but we couldn't talk much. Then we were silent. Then, a few minutes before five o'clock, Alice came over to me and kissed me. I pushed her back into her chair. "I've got to be alone for this." I waited for anything, more afraid than I ever have been, before that or since, and then it was five o'clock. We compared watches. We called the desk and checked the time. It was five minutes past the hour. Then Alice began to cry, and I let her cry it out. Then we decided to go home.

There was a crowd and commotion down in the lobby, but we didn't stop. Later I realized that one of them would have remembered that I liked the Waldorf and would go there, but then we didn't stop.

We got a cab. As we drove uptown, we saw seven separate crowds, accident crowds, which are unmistakable in New York. "This town is becoming a battlefront," the driver said. We didn't say anything at all. But there were no gray herringbones, not along the way, not in front of the house we lived in and not waiting for us in our apartment.

We were home less than an hour when the police came. Two plainclothes men and two men in uniform. They talked like cops and wanted to know whether I was Professor Robert Clyde Bottman.

"That's right."

"What do you do?"

"I teach physics at Columbia University."

"You got anything to identify yourself?"

"Well, I live here," I said. "Of course I have."

"You got pictures of yourself?"

I wanted to know if they had gone out of their minds, but Alice smiled sweetly and brought our scrapbook and our family album. That seemed to satisfy them a little; wholly satisfied, they never were. For in three places in New York, friends of mine had been talking to me when I disappeared.

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Just disappeared—poof, and done with.

One of the plainclothes men asked if I was twins, and the other said, "He'd have to be better than triplets."

Then they called downtown, and discovered that the number of men around town—gray herringbone suits and bald—reported to have disappeared into thin air, poof, at exactly 5:00 o'clock, had reached seventy-eight, and was mounting steadily. They stared at me without saying anything.

They argued about arresting me; one wanted to, the other didn't. They called downtown again, and then they told me not to leave town without notifying them, and then they left. A little while later, Professor Dunbar rang our doorbell.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "I turned my back for a moment, and you were gone. Really, Bob, you must trace that circuit again."

Alice smiled and promised that I would come tomorrow and fix the circuit once and for all.

As the professor was leaving, he said, "Most interesting thing, you know. There must have been two dozen cats outside when I left. All of them exactly like Prudence."

"Prudence is the Professor's cat," I explained to Alice.

"Oh, I have Prudence back—oh, yes. I'm very fond of cats. But I never realized how alike they can be."

"And I am sure we look alike to cats, Professor Dunbar," Alice said.

"Oh, good. Very good indeed. I never thought of it that way. But I suppose we do. Well, tomorrow's another day."

"Thank God it is," Alice said.

We let him out and Alice made scrambled eggs for dinner, and then the press began to arrive. They were tiring, but we stuck to our ignorance and smiled disbelievingly about men in gray herringbone suits disappearing into thin air. I don't know whether it is for better or worse. For a few days, it was a bigger thing than flying saucers, and it made me rather uncomfortable at school. But Alice says it won't last.

It's her theory that I and my gray herringbone suit will be forgotten in a general problem of cats. Professor Dunbar lives in the North Bronx, and when we drove up to his house the following day, to fix a circuit once and for all and to fix it properly, we counted over a hundred cats. Those were the ones we saw. Alice says that cats that don't disappear—poof—have more lasting interest than college professors who do. Alice says if man can learn to live with the atom, he can learn to live with cats. Anyway, you can't hold science back, and sooner or later, someone else will tie a knot in time. Only I don't like to think about it.

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The occupant of the next bed was dying, and he knew it. Somehow, it made him want to talk . . . and what he had to say revealed that he must be something more than human . . .

The Distant Sound of Engines

by Algis Budrys

"LEN? LENNY?" THE MAN IN THE next bed was trying to wake me up.

I lay in the dark, my hands behind my head, listening to the traffic going by the hospital. Even late at night — and it was late whenever the man in the next bed dared to talk to me—the traffic outside was fairly heavy because the highway ran straight through town. That had been a lucky thing for me, because the ambulance attendant never had been able to stop the flow of blood out of my legs. Another half mile, another two minutes, and I would have been as dry as a castoff snakeskin.

But I was all right, now, except that the jacknifing truck had taken my legs off under the dashboard. I was alive, and I could hear the trucks going by all night. The long, long rigs; semi-trailers, tandems, reefers . . . coming up the seaboard from Charleston and Norfolk, going on to New York . . . coming down from Boston, from Providence . . . Men I knew, driving them. Jack Biggs. Sam Lasovic. Tiny Morrs, with the ring finger of his right hand missing at the first joint. I was one up on Tiny, for sure.

Job in the dispatcher's office waiting for you, Lenny, I said to myself. No sweat. No more bad coffee, cold nights, sandpaper eyes. Getting a little old for the road, anyhow. Thirty-eight. Sure.

"Lenny . . ."

The best the man in the next bed would do was whisper. I wondered if he wasn't just afraid. He was afraid to talk at all in the daytime, because the nurses simply stuck a new needle in him every time he made a sound. Stuck it through a thin place in the bandages, they did, and walked away in a hurry. Sometimes they missed the vein and the morphine just stayed under his skin, so that only his arm went numb. The man in the next

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bed bragged about the times that happened. He tried to make them miss, moving his arms a little. Sometimes they noticed, but more often they didn't.

He didn't want the needle, the man in the next bed didn't. The needle took away the pain, and without the pain, with bandaging all over his face, he didn't have any proof he was alive. He was a stubborn, smart man, fighting back that way, because he'd developed a craving for the stuff.

"*Lenny . . .*"

"Hunh?" I said, fogging my voice. I always made him wait. I didn't want him to know I stayed awake all night.

"Awake?"

"Now."

"I'm sorry, Len."

"Okay," I said quickly. I didn't want him feeling obligated to me. "It's all right. I get plenty of sleep daytimes."

"Len. The formula for exceeding the velocity of light is . . ." And he began giving me the figures and letters.

Last night it had been the exact proportions of the metals in a high-temperature resistant alloy; the melting and pouring techniques for it; the hardening process. The night before, hull specifications. I listened until he was through.

"Have you got that, Lenny?"

"Sure."

"Read it back to me."

I worked in a diner three years, once. I could remember anything anybody told me—I didn't care how complicated—and rattle it off right back at him. It's a trick; you wipe your mind clean, open your ears, and in it comes: "Two grilled cheese to go; bacon and tomato, white toast, no mayonnaise. Three coffees; one black, no sugar; one light and sweet; one regular." You open your mouth, turn toward the sandwich man, and out it comes: "G.A.C. on two, seaboard. B.T. down, hold the mayo." You turn toward the coffee cups and put out your hands. Your fingers grab the cups, and you move to the spigot on the urn. You tap the milk jug handle three times over one cup, twice over the other. The third cup slides by automatically. The important part of your mind is a million miles away. You put the coffees down, and your mind wipes out that part of the order. The sandwich man hands you two wax-paper-wrapped squares and a plate with the B.T. on it. You give them to the customers, and your mind wipes out the rest of it. It's gone, used up, and all the time the important part of your mind is a million miles away.

I listened to the rigs going up a hill in compound. Pittsburgh, Scranton, Philadelphia . . . Washington, Baltimore, Camden, Newark . . . A diesel went by—a flat-

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bed, with I beams for a load—while I was reading back the last part of what he'd told me.

"That's right, Lenny. That's *right!*"

I suppose it was. In a diner, you eat the orders you foul up.

"Any more tonight?" I asked him.

"No. No, that's enough. I'm going to get some rest, now. Go back to sleep now. Thanks."

"Sure."

"No, don't be so casual. You're doing a big thing for me. It's important to me to pass these things on to you people. I'm not going to last much longer."

"Sure, you are."

"No, Lennie."

"Come on."

"No. I was burning as I fell. Remember the alternate radical in the equation I gave you the first night? The field was distorted by the Sun, and the generator restructured the . . ." He went on, but I don't remember it. I would have had to remember the original equation for it to make any sense to me, and even if I remembered it I would have had to understand it. This business of reading his equations back to him, see . . . that was a trick. Who wants to remember how many grilled cheese sandwiches to go did you sell during the day? I had a wise guy order in double-talk, once. I read it back to him like a man running a strip of tape through a recorder, and I wasn't even listening.

". . . So, you see, Lenny, I'm not going to live. A man in my condition wouldn't survive even in my time and place."

"You're wrong, Buddy. They'll pull you through. They know their business in this place."

"Do you really think so, Lenny?" He whispered it with a sad laugh, if you know what I mean.

"Sure," I said. I was listening to a tanker going by from the north. I could hear the clink of the static chain.

They had brought the man in the next bed in from what they figured was a real bad private plane fire. They said some farmer had seen him falling free, as if he'd jumped without a parachute. They hadn't been able to identify him yet, or find his plane, and he wouldn't give a name. The first two nights he hadn't said a word, until suddenly he said: "Is anybody listening? Is there someone there?"

I had spoken up, and he had asked me about myself—what my name was, what my trouble was. He wanted to know the name of the town, and the nation, and the date—day, month, and year. I told him. I'd seen him in his bandages, during the day, and a man in shape like that, you don't argue about his questions. You answer them. You're glad for the

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chance to do him a kindness.

He was a smart man, too. He spoke a mess of languages besides English. He tried me in Hungarian for a while, but he knew it a lot better than I did. It's been a long time since I left the folks in Chicago.

I told the nurse, the next day, that he'd been talking to me. The doctors tried to find out who he was and where from, but he didn't talk to them. He convinced them, I think, that he was back in a coma again; they hadn't much believed me when I said he'd talked sensibly at all. After that, I knew better than to tell anybody anything. If he wanted it his way, he was entitled. Except he found out, like I've said, that if he made a sound during the day, they'd give him another needle. You couldn't blame them. It was their way of doing him a kindness.

I lay back, and watched the ceiling begin getting light from the first touch of day outside the windows. Traffic was picking up outside, now. The rigs went by one after another. Farm produce, most likely, catching the market. Lettuce and potatoes, oranges and onions—I could hear the crates shifting on top of each other on the big stake bodies, and the creak of the tie ropes.

"Lenny!"

I answered right away.

"Lenny, the equation for coordinating spacetime is . . ." He was in a hurry.

"Yeah." I let it soak into the trick sponge in my mind, and when he asked me to read it back, I squeezed it dry again.

"Thank you, Lenny," he said. I could barely hear him—I began thumbing the night-call bell on the cord draped over the head of my bed.

The next day, there was a new man in the next bed. He was a hunter—a young fellow, from New York—and he'd put a load of birdshot all through his right thigh. It was a couple of days before he wanted to talk, and I didn't get to know him, much.

I guess it was the second or third afternoon after the new man had come in, when my doctor straightened up and pulled the sheet back over my stumps. He looked at me in a peculiar way, and said, offhandedly: "Tell you what, Lenny—suppose we send you down to surgery and take a little bit more off each of those, hmm?"

"Nuts, Doc, I can smell it, too. Why bother?"

We didn't have much more to say to each other. I lay thinking about Peoria, Illinois, which used to be more fun than it has been lately—for truckers, I mean—and St. Louis, and Corpus Christi. I wasn't satisfied with just the Eastern Seaboard anymore. Sacra-

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mento, Seattle, Fairbanks and that miserable long run over the Alcan Highway . . .

In the middle of the night, I was still remembering. I could hear the rigs out on the street, but I was really listening to the sound a Cummins makes going into one of those long switchback grades over the Rockies, and suddenly I turned my head and whispered: "Fellow! Hey, fellow—you awake?" to the new man in the next bed.

I heard him grunt. "What?" He sounded annoyed. But he was listening.

"You ever do any driving? I mean, you ever go down through New Jersey in your car? Well, look, if you ever need a break on tires or a battery, you stop by Jeffrey's Friendly Gas and Oil, on Route 22 in Darlington, and tell 'em Lenny Kovacs sent you. Only watch out—there's a speed trap right outside town, in the summer. . . . And if you want a good meal, try the Strand Restaurant, down the street there. Or if you're going the other way, up into New England, you take the Boston Post Road and stop by . . . Fellow? You listening?"

Sportsman's Difficulty

To every man, his favorite hunting;
my game, the unicorn.
Never a thunder like his trumpet throat.
Never such lightning
as flames, all gold or lilac, from that eye.
I do not know how he can toss so proudly
his horse's head weighted with that vast horn.
He is the king
of all that tread on hooves;
his own are windshod,
and if you think wind is not hard like iron,
go lean against it in a city canyon.

I could have caught a herd of unicorns
were the bait easier
to find.

DORIS PITKIN BUCK

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The invading aliens—despite their incredible red tape—were mercilessly efficient in their control of mankind.

The Certificate

by Avram Davidson

THE WINTER SUNRISE WAS STILL two hours away when Dr. Roger Freeman came to stand in front of the great door. By good fortune – incredibly good fortune – he had not been questioned in his furtive progress from the dormitory. If he had been stopped, or if his answer had been either disbelieved or judged inadequate, he might have been sent back to the dorm for punishment. The punishment would have been over, of course, in time for him to go to work at ten in the morning, but a man could suffer through several thousand eternities of Hell in those few hours. And no more than a low muffled groaning and a subdued convulsive movement of the body to show what was going on. You were able to sleep through it—if it was happening to someone else.

The great door was set well in from the street, and the cutting edge of the wind was broken by it.

Freeman was grateful for that. It was two years ago that he'd applied for a new overcoat, and the one he still had was ragged even then. Perhaps—if this was not to be his year for escape—in another year he would get the coat. He crowded into a corner and tried not to think of the cold.

After a little while another man joined him, then another, then a woman, then a couple. By sunrise there was a long line. They were all willing to risk it, risk punishment for being out before work, or for being late to work. Some merely wanted clothes. Some wanted permission to visit relatives in another locale. You could wait years for either. Or, you could wait years and not get either. And some, like Freeman, hoped against hope for a chance at escape.

Dr. Freeman stared at the door. The design was as intricate as it was incomprehensible. No doubt it made sense to the Hedderans.

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If you could understand it you might gain some understanding of the nature of their distant home. If you cared. It was fifty years since they had arrived, and men still knew almost nothing about them.

They were here. They would never go away. That was enough.

The man behind Dr. Freeman collapsed. No one paid any attention to him. After a moment there was a high, brief, humming. The man twitched, opened his eyes. He got to his feet.

And then the door opened.

"Proceed in the order," the voice directed—a thick, flat Hedderan voice; harsh, yet glutinous. No one tried to push ahead, the lesson had been too well learned. Dr. Freeman got on the third escalator, rode down two levels. There had been a time when you rode *up*—but that was before the Hedderans came. They didn't like tall buildings—at least it seemed so. They'd never explained—that, or anything else. What they did not like they simply destroyed.

Dr. Freeman looked behind him as he approached the office. There must have been at least a dozen people behind him. They looked at him wolfishly. So few certificates were granted, and he was first in line. He looked away. He'd stayed awake all night in order to *be* the first. No one had the right to resent him. And the next man in line was young. What did he expect . . .?

The door opened, the voice said, *"Proceed one at a single time."* Fifty years, and the Hedderans still hadn't mastered the language. They didn't have to, of course. Roger Freeman entered the office, took the application form from the slot in the wall-machine found in every office, sat down at the table. When was the last time he had sat in a chair? No matter.

The form was in Hedderan, of course. The voice said, *"Name."* The voice said, *"Number."*

He wrote it down, Roger Freeman . . . 655-673-60-60-2. Idly he glanced at the cluster of Hedderan characters. If one could take the application form away, with Hedderan questions and English answers, perhaps—if there was time—a key could be found for translating. But it was impossible to take it away. If you spoiled it, you were out. You could apply only once a year. And if you *did* find out how to read their language, what then? Freeman's brother Bob had talked of rebellion—but that was years ago . . . and he didn't like to think what had happened to Bob. And besides, he hadn't *time* —he had to be at work by ten.

From ten in the morning until ten at night (the Hedderans had their own ways of reckoning time) he worked at a machine,

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pulling hard on levers. Some he had to bend down to reach, some he had to mount steps to reach. Up and down, up and down. He didn't know what the machine did, or even how it worked. And he no longer cared. He no longer cared about anything — except a new overcoat (or, at least, a *newer* one, not worn so thin), and his chances of escape.

Age. Occupation. Previous Occupation. Previous to the arrival of the Hedderans, that was. Fifty years ago. He had been a physician. An obsolete skill. Inside of every man nowadays there was a piece of . . . something . . . presumably it communicated with a machine somewhere deep in the Hedderan quarters. If you broke a bone or bled or even if you just fainted (as the young man behind him in line had), you were set right almost in the second. No one was ill for long—even worn-out organs were regenerated. Too few men had been left alive and, the Hedderans needed those who were left too much to let them sicken or die.

At last the long form was filled out. The harsh voice said, *"Now at once to Office Ten, Level Four."*

Dr. Freeman hastily obeyed. When they said 'at once,' they meant just that. The punishment might come like a single whiplash—or it might go on and on. You never knew. Maybe the Hedderans knew. But they never told.

The man next behind the outer door scuttled in as Freeman left. The others waited. Not more than three could expect to be processed before it would be time to return to work.

Office Ten, Level Four, asked him the same questions, but in a different order. He was then directed to Office Five, Level Seventeen. Here his two forms were fed into a machine, returned with markings stamped on them in Hedderan.

"Office Eight, Level Two," the voice said. There, he fed his applications into the slot. After a moment they came back — unmarked.

"Name Roger Freeman. Number 655-673-60-60-2. You have a single time application outstanding. Unpermitted two. You will cancel this one. Or you will cancel that one."

Frantically he searched his mind. What application did he have outstanding? When was this rule made? The overcoat! If he went ahead with this new application and it was refused, he'd have to wait till next year to reinstate the one for the coat. And then more years of waiting . . . It was cold, the dormitory was ill-heated, he had no blanket. His present coat was very worn. Services for humans were minimal.

But he *had* to proceed with this new application. He was first in line . . .

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"Speak," the thick, flat voice directed. *"Answer. Speak. Now."*

Gobbling his words in haste, Freeman said, "I cancel the one outstanding."

"Insert forms."

He did. Waited.

"Proceed to Office Ten, Level Four."

That was the second place he'd been to. A mistake? No matter, he had to go. Once again he entered. And waited.

A grunting noise caught his eye. He looked up, started, cowered. A Hedderan, his baffle-screen turned off, was gazing at him. The blank, grey, faceted eyes in the huge head, and the body, like a deformed foetus . . . then the baffle-screen went on again. Freeman shuddered. One rarely saw them. It had been years.

A piece of paper slid from the machine. He took it up, waiting for the command to proceed — where? Unless it could be accomplished before ten, there was no chance of escape for him this year. None whatever. He stared dully at the strange characters. The cold, indifferent voice said, *"Name Roger Freeman. Number 655-673-60-60-2. Declared surplus. Application for death certificate is granted. Proceed for certificate to Office One, Level Five. At once."*

Tears rolled down Dr. Freeman's cheeks. "At last," he sobbed, joyfully. "At last . . ."

And then he hastily left. He had achieved his escape after all —but only if he got there before ten o'clock.

Coming next month . . .

To See Another Mountain, a short novelet by Frederik Pohl, concerning an old man with the greatest mind since Einstein, and the importance of keeping him alive and alert; a previously untranslated science fiction parody by Anton Chekhov — *The Flying Islands*, "written as though by Jules Verne"; *Flowers for Algernon*, a short novelet by Daniel Keyes, about a moron who becomes a genius, and the unexpected, and unsettling, results; a surprising, warmly human story by Isaac Asimov; a science fiction-detective story by Poul Anderson; a dark tale of a strong young man and a beautiful witch, by Gordon R. Dickson; a lively short novelet on the wonder and grandeur of man's penetration of deep space, by a talented newcomer, Anne McCaffrey; plus various other delights . . .

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Stuart Palmer's first great success was THE PENGUIN POOL MURDER, *published in 1931. (The movie it inspired starred Edna Mae Oliver as Hildegarde Withers, and Jimmy Gleason as Inspector Oscar Piper.) His first F&SF story was* A Bride for the Devil, *in our Fall 1949 issue—Vo. 1, No. 1. We bring you here the printed proof that Mr. Palmer is still going strong.*

Three-Dimensional Valentine

by Stuart Palmer

IT MIGHT BE SPRING, LOVELY SPRING, in the world Outside. But in her narrow cell Zilla felt no balmy breezes carrying the scent of new grass and flowers. She never saw the sun anymore, or felt its warmth.

The tragedy of it was that Zilla was young, and just coming into lovely maturity. The months in the prison cell had not changed her much outwardly. But she was moping; sometimes she even wondered if she were just a little stir-crazy. Her appetite was almost nil. She had little heart to work at the tasks set for her by the warden and the uniformed guard. Most of the time she only walked listlessly around her cramped quarters, up and down. Her cell was just like all the others in the long, grim cell-block; this was a maximum-security prison, with only solitary confinement cells. The parole board had never even heard of her, nor she of them.

Surely this was cruel and inhuman punishment, expressly forbidden by The Bill of Rights. Zilla knew that others of her sex were prisoners too, in adjoining cells. But the barriers were too thick to allow even the slightest tap of communication. She was evidently doomed to everlasting loneliness.

Prison life had not been so hard to bear, not at first. They had taken away her name and given her a number, true. But she hadn't protested, not even at the harsh life-sentence. Quickly she had adjusted herself to the new routines, to the daily inspections so embarrassing for a lady. The food was plentiful and meals were regular, if a bit monotonous. There were no daily hazards as in the outside world. She had no decisions to make. She was as safe as a beetle caught in amber.

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Zilla worked more or less dutifully at her appointed tasks from dawn until mid-morning. Then came mess-call. After that she rested, tried to amuse herself, slept now and then — and dreamed. There were no books, there was no piped-in radio or television. There was utter loneliness, utter monotony.

Of course, there had been the interruption caused by her illnesses—the brief, feverish, nightmare times. But they hadn't even taken her to the infirmary. She was supposedly well past the latest convalescence now, yet somehow she had lost her fine artist's touch; she had lost all drive and almost all interest in going on living. Sometimes she thought of going on a hunger-strike, or even of the dark finality of suicide.

It actually *was* spring, wonderful spring, in the world outside Zilla's prison cell. It was the genuine New England spring that comes wonderfully if belatedly to that northern clime, warming and coloring everything it touches. Grass was at last miraculously new-green again on the ancient lawns of a certain great university campus, and great elms — older than the nation itself—were budding full. It was that special day in April of each year when nature makes it clear that lo, the winter is past . . . the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

Along with the trees and flowers, Miss Catherine Beale was budding too, almost blossoming in fact, as on that wonderful April morning she came floating across the campus and ran up the steps of ivy-covered Science Hall. She also ran up the two flights of worn marble stairs three steps at a time, being in that sort of mood. As a graduate student-teacher, working for her Master's in Psych, Cathy Beale knew that talking to yourself, even in the springtime, is indicative of psychoneurotic tendencies. But anyway, she said aloud, "Something just wonderful is going to happen to me today!" And she firmly believed it, too. "I feel it in my bones!" she added.

May it be recorded here that the bones Cathy felt things in were very nice long lean ones, satisfactorily covered with all the most graceful padding; her exact dimensions are a secret, since she has never been a candidate for Miss America or Miss Anything. But she could have been, had her mind turned toward spotlights instead of more sensibly toward the academic field. She was still a girl of twenty-two, and she dreamed. Naturally.

Now, having reached the top floor, she paused by the mirror hung just above the drinking-fountain to try the effect of a bunch of fresh violets—violets no darker than her own soft eyes—in

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her hair. Then she replaced them above her swelling young bosom, then on one side, and on the other.

"Complete waste of time, dearie," observed a dry feminine voice behind her. It was Dr. Marge Thomas, biologist, gray boyish-bob, five feet tall and 140 pounds dripping wet—which she often was when on field-trips. She was also a friend.

"Huh?" gasped Cathy, turning.

"Doctor Will McGregor wouldn't notice it if you carried your pretty posies in your mouth, like Carmen with her rose." Dr. Marge was very fond of opera. She was also very fond of people, in her way.

Cathy said: "Oh, gosh! Is it so *very* obvious, then?"

"Not that obvious. But I am a biologist, child. . . . Truly, you won't get anywhere with the guy. You haven't got what it takes, you haven't got a cephalothorax with six pairs of appendages and a soft unsegmented abdomen . . ."

"I'll have you know my abdomen is as unsegmented as anybody's! But let's leave it out of the conversation, even among us girls."

Dr. Marge sighed. "Catherine, I do wish you hadn't had to go and fall for McGregor. Sure, he's a whiz in his line. But more than a few of us have wondered, during the years he has honored the university with his august presence, if he is even remotely aware of the difference between the sexes."

"*Vive la difference!*" quoted Cathy fervently. Then she smiled and nodded at dear old Dr. Marge (who must have been all of forty-five) and went on to push open the doors of the Lab—the dear, dear Lab. With her fingers crossed.

There he was—Dr. William Ross McGregor, Ph.D., F.R.S., etc. and etc. He was hunched over his battered oaken desk in the corner near the window, amid a mountain of index cards, behavior charts, and photo enlargements. He was wearing that same old tweed jacket again, with the leather patches on the elbows and the missing button. As usual, he smoked a long briar pipe and his hair looked as if it had been combed, and for that matter also cut, by an enemy. He barely looked up.

"Hi," Cathy said brightly. "Gosh, you're already at it. Am I late?"

"Good morning, Miss Beale. No, you're not late. I'm afraid I'm a little early. Wanted to get down and check on the thermostat, because of this blasted heat-wave. A temperature change of even a few degrees in here could throw all our specimens off kilter, you know."

"Yes, Doctor Will." Cathy put her brief-case down on a file quite

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near him, standing so close that certainly the man must get a whiff of the violets, even through his tobacco. "Darling," she said, "if only you'd take off those glasses and look up and smile sometimes, you'd be just about the handsomest man on campus, really you would! You're only thirty-six, you know." She made this intimate observation quite silently. Out loud she ventured to say, "Notice anything different today?" and came a little closer still.

"Yes, beautiful," Dr. Will said fervently.

"Huh?"

"This," he explained, showing her a photograph blown up to 9x12. It was a shot of a spiderweb, but a spiderweb that was somehow all wrong, all ungeometrical.

"Isn't that something!" Cathy quickly agreed. In her nearly two semesters as the doctor's part-time assistant she had had to exclaim over many a spiderweb, even when they all looked alike to her. "Who did that little gem?"

"Thirty-six, day before yesterday," said the neuropsychiatrist proudly as if he had done it himself.

"Q-type serum?"

He nodded. "From that new manic-depressive over in the violent ward at the hospital. Absolutely typical, isn't it?"

"It sure is. You know, Dr. Will, since we started this new line of experimentation, we've acquired the darndest collection of spider artwork in history. We ought to set up an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. I know you're going to use a few of the best ones for the book, but—"

"But the Book will be read by perhaps five hundred people, if I ever get it written. Perhaps half of them will understand it." He sighed, put the photograph back in the pile, and turned to his charts.

"Special orders for today, Doctor?"

He handed her a slip of paper. "I want to try mirrors in Section Seven for a day or so, and see if that spurs the work any. Or reverses the patterns."

"Yes, sir. But somehow it doesn't seem fair to make them compete against themselves. It could lead to a neurosis."

Dr. Will was almost amused. "Don't get anthropomorphistic, Miss Beale. They are only spiders, remember."

"Yes, doctor." Feeling slightly snubbed, Cathy turned and approached the long rank of little wooden boxes that stood almost at eye-level against the wall. Here were no less than sixty fine healthy specimens of *zilla-exnotata,* the master-weavers, the lace-makers of all the Arachnida, spinning out their busy little lives. They were, of course, all females, the male spider being a lazy, feck-

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less mosquito-legged creature attractive only to the female and then only very briefly. Each of the lady-captives behind the glass had everything a spider could want—except freedom.

There were little paper cones (black paper to make the webs stand out better in photography) in which to work and live, soda-straws of water to drink from, and regular, delicious meals. They spun only in the early morning, creating their geometric jewelry-in-silk. No two webs were ever absolutely identical, yet no web ever varied from the ancestral spider pattern. Except here under controlled conditions, on the top floor of Science Hall.

Cathy's slim strong hands moved swiftly, deftly, as she refilled the straws with water from a medicine dropper, adjusted the tiny cones, and put a red Alert tag on the cells where a web was nearing completion, a green Okay tag where the job was finished and photography was indicated.

The serving of dinner was somewhat more complicated. From a tin container where dozens of fat, mature *musca domesticans* had this morning been given euthanasia by means of gas, she very carefully lifted out a dead fly with tweezers, laid it gently on the outer edges of a web, and then sounded the dinner-gong. This, since dead flies do not buzz and since spiders will not knowingly eat a dead one, was simply the twanging of a middle-C tuning-fork held in Cathy's hand.

It was a fascinating routine, as a matter of fact—though in the beginning Cathy hadn't found it easy to conquer her instinctive feminine revulsion to spiders. But now she found herself thinking of them as individuals; with some she had established a certain odd sense of rapport.

Cathy hummed as she worked. The Lab was otherwise silent, except for the occasional twang of the tuning-fork and the faint scratch of Dr. Will's busy pen. The girl moved methodically along the cell-block until at last she came to number Fifty-two. There she stopped, disappointed. "Oh, dear!" she cried. "Doctor, by any chance have you looked at Zilla this morning?"

"No, why?" But he pushed aside his charts and came briskly over. This particular spider was one of his prize pupils, his prima donna; he intended to devote an entire chapter to her in the Book (otherwise known as "Association of Mental Diseases with Certain Disorders in Blood Chemistry"—a very catchy title, Cathy thought).

"She's started three new webs, and quit cold on all of them," the girl pointed out. "I think she's moping."

Dr. Will frowned. Fifty-two had been the most devoted of

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workers, the most inspired creator of webs, even among a species noted for its artistry. She had been the first of the specimen spiders to eat a fly from which the juices had been removed and which had been filled with blood serum taken from a catatonic schizophrenic mental patient over at the hospital—and then in her weaving to exhibit all possible spiderish symptoms of the disease. For a week or so her creations had all been frantic, half-formed abortions!

Which had clearly demonstrated Dr. Will McGregor's original hypothesis that mental disease is closely associated with some imbalance of the chemistry of the blood. But more than that. Weeks ago Zilla had been fed with serum taken from the blood stream of a recovered schizo patient—and according to the irrefutable evidence of her webs, she had recovered too! She had gone back to weaving her miniature masterpieces, accomplished as ever.

Until now. Now she was evidently off the beam entirely, for some reason or other.

Dr. Will was troubled. "She does look a little restless, but otherwise I don't see any cause for her not working," he pronounced.

"Do you suppose it could be spring fever? Maybe she needs some sort of tonic? How about us giving her a fly with maybe a shot of sherry in it?"

"My dear young woman!" He was amused. "No, if she's hungry she'll finish a web and sit down and wait to eat, like a nice, obedient girl. She isn't trying at the moment, that is all. Or else she isn't hungry enough—"

"There are different varieties of hunger," Cathy pointed out softly, leaning a little closer to him. "Honestly, Doctor, maybe Zilla *does* somehow sense that it's spring, and that life ought to be more than just the eat-work-sleep routine."

"Spring-fever? In a spider? Miss Beale, honestly—"

"It *is* spring, you know. Even if you didn't notice my violets." (She almost said this out loud.) "Are you still wearing your long underwear, metaphorically speaking? Darling, I *do* love you so ecstatically, but sometimes I would like to slap your silly face. Are you ever going to kiss me or not?" (All silent.) "Yes, Doctor," she said out loud.

Zilla the spider came forth an inch or so, along the line of the latest, unfinished web-structure. Then she scuttled back. It is possible that she sensed the very real if unspoken tension between the Warden and the Guard.

"Well then, let's get back to work!" Dr. Will suggested firmly. "Zilla — I mean Fifty-two — will snap out of it. Because—"

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"Because, after all, she is only a spider! But think of her case-history! Zilla has had almost every mental disease that humans can have, and has recovered from them all!" Cathy was warmly, lovingly, indignant. All or nothing —this was a point she had to make, right now. "And remember, dear Doctor—'Viewed in the light of their highly-organized social relations and adaptations, many of the insects seem more intelligent, more nearly human in their rationality perhaps, then are the majority of the vertebrates. It is only their small size and lack of close resemblance to ourselves that enables us to think of them as purely unconscious mechanisms. Were ants and spiders large enough to be obtrusive, were they similar to us in body form, we should undoubtedly consider their behavior indicative of an intelligence similar to our own.' I forget what comes next."

Dr. William McGregor scowled. "What sophomoric ass are you quoting?"

"You, doctor," Cathy said with sweet temerity. "From what you said in your graduate thesis entitled *Speculations on Phylogenesis*. There's a copy of it in the Libe, and I memorized that part after I found the thing, and learned that I might have a chance to work with you with insects—sorry, I mean spiders, and —and . . ." She turned the full power of her adoring smile upon the man, and he almost winced under the impact.

"I was somewhat younger then—" Dr. Will began, a bit lamely.

"But what you were saying then means that insects—and spiders—*can* think, only they just don't think along our lines? I know I'm over-simplifying. . . ."

"You are indeed," declared the doctor, hastily reverting to a previously-prepared position. "But you must grant that the chief difference between our and the insect's (or spider's) mind would seem to appear in the relative importance of instinct and reason. Would you not go that far?"

"Well, yes. But maybe they share in the most primal urge of all—perpetuation of the species. Sex, if you will pardon the word in these cloistered halls."

"Sex? Sex, my dear young lady, is common to all organisms above the ameoba level," Dr. Will said quickly. He looked at his wrist-watch, and started. "Ouch! I have, it seems, a seminar in a bit less than five minutes. Excuse me, Miss Beale!"

"*Miss Beale* he calls me—after these lovely months of working together and fellowship and everything!" she exploded, still silently. But then she did, on an impulse, catch his arm just as he was about to take off. "Doctor Will, I'd really, seriously, like to

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do something for little Zilla here. She isn't happy. Just as one female to another, I feel a strange kinship with her. Could I try a sort of experiment?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I bet I could snap her out of it. Maybe I could get her to eat something, even if she really hasn't made a proper web. If I fed her a fly with a smidgeon of alcohol in it, maybe? Something to get her back on the groove again?"

"My dear young woman! You want to try to make an alcoholic out of this poor bug? Spiders don't need tonics—not even in the springtime. And besides, as you know very well there's no way to give to to her, except roundabout. We'd have to give a human subject enough whiskey to get him pretty drunk, and then draw out a sample of blood and substitute it for the juices of a fly and then give the fly to her. It's—it's frivolous and unethical and — but you're really just kidding, aren't you?" Dr. Will looked at his watch again. "Oops—now I do *really* have to run. See you tomorrow at the same time, Miss Beale."

He almost did run, too. Cathy stared after the handsome, dedicated, thick-headed young doctor until the Lab doors had stopped swinging, and for a long moment after that. Then she looked thoughtfully down at Zilla the spider, who was now staring right back up at her. Cathy had once thought that all spiders looked baleful and aloof, but now she wasn't so sure. Never underestimate the power of a woman—or, never underestimate the extrasensory perception of a woman.

"You wait right there, bug!" commanded Cathy firmly. Then she rushed out, and went all the way down the long hall to Biology. There she seized upon Dr. Marge Thomas, and demanded the loan of 20 cc.s of C2H5OH, otherwise known as pure ethyl alcohol.

"Certainly, my dear," said Dr. Marge, as she rose to unlock a cabinet. "You using it to preserve something?"

"Yes," confessed Cathy solemnly. "*Me*, in a way." And she hurried back to the Lab, with the bottle in her hand. "I do everything the *hard way*," said Cathy to herself, as she locked the doors.

Zilla took it with the essential seriousness of her tribe. She started work with the first flush of the dawn, hangover or not. This particular web was to be her masterpiece, perhaps her swansong, but she didn't give a spider-damn. The four pairs of spinnerets, located in the handy spot where she would have sat down had she been humanoid, worked like a machine-rifle. And the wonder-web grew and took form—form

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such as certainly no spider had ever spun before.

But there must have been a first time for everything. Many many years ago the first primate got tired of walking on all fours, and stood up on his hind legs. So Zilla spun. Her tiny three-chambered heart, no bigger than the head of a pin, was pounding so she could hardly contain it. She was at this hour a Woman With a Message —a message that could only be said through a web of silken gossamer.

The next morning began quite as usual, for humans. Dr. Will McGregor came in a bit early to check on the thermostat and do some dictation to the tape-recorder on Chapter Twelve. He was very busy when Cathy entered, put down her brief-case, and said a bright "Good morning." She had spent half the night writing and tearing up love-lyrics, and her look at the mirror in the hall had told her that she looked pale but interesting.

Not that Dr. Will seemed very interested. He refilled his pipe, and handed her the orders for the day. Cathy was in a mood to tear them up and shower the bits over him like a snowstorm. But she only said casually, "By the way, I really did do what I threatened yesterday."

"What?" He looked up, puzzled.

"I—I gave Zilla a tonic—a trace of alcohol."

"*What?* But—whose blood serum?"

"Mine, of course," confessed the girl. "I got myself a bit plastered. Oh, I guess it was crazy of me. But I did feel so strongly that something was the matter with the poor thing. She has barely just enough web to hang the fly on, and I had to sound the pitch for five minutes before she condescended to come out and eat—"

Dr. Will looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He stood up and took off his glasses. Obviously he couldn't decide whether to be angry or amused, so he settled on curiousity. "Well, with what results, if any?"

"I'm almost afraid to look," Cathy admitted.

"We'll look together," the doctor said firmly. And they did. Then they gasped as one, blinked, and looked again. Zilla was snugly sleeping it off in her nest. But the web was one for the Book—for all books, anywhere. It was three-dimensional, it was incredibly complex, its delicate silken strands crossed and re-crossed—it had a pattern, but what pattern?

"I think it looks like—" began Cathy.

But Dr. Will touched her shoulder. "I've got an idea—it's a psychological experiment I've been planning for some time, and now is my chance! We'll have an im-

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mediate staff conference. Run down the hall and get all the faculty members you can. This is a spiderweb that will make history!"

Cathy, somewhat puzzled, obeyed. And in less than ten minutes a sizable group of savants and professors were crowding around Zilla's masterpiece. They were suitably impressed, too. Dr. Will was master of ceremonies, naturally. "I would appreciate it very much," he said, when the exclamations had died down, "if each one of you would take a pencil and a piece of paper and—without any consultation between you—write down for me just what you see in this phenomenal creation of Zilla's."

And they did. The results were somewhat unexpected, because no two of them saw the same thing. Dr. Marge Thomas said she got the impression of a Cape Cod cottage, somehow. Professor Ayers, a famous mathematician of almost retirement age, said the web reminded him in some mysterious way of the Wyoming hills of his youth. Dr. Bates, of Physics, fancied he saw in the web an equation almost solved, one that had been haunting him for years. Professor Willis, of Engineering, saw the structural design for a bridge of some far distant future, and Associate-professor Martha Klein fancied she saw the face of a boy she had known once, long long ago. And Cathy Beale, feeling reckless, wrote down that what she saw was a sort of cubistic valentine, heart and all!

Dr. Will McGregor read the various sheets—though not aloud, naturally—and then put them carefully away in his desk. He promised to send each of the volunteer subjects of this most unusual experiment a photograph of the web, if such a three or four dimensional web could ever be caught on film, and then he ushered his colleagues out. "Amazing!" he said to Cathy, when they were alone again. And he showed her the test-papers.

She faced him accusingly. "It isn't fair! You didn't say what you yourself saw in the web!"

"I was the observer," he reminded her. He stared down again at Zilla's fantastic handiwork, and scratched his head. There was a sort of awed comprehension in his face. "But do you really want me to tell you what I see in it? I'll tell you, Cathy. I see that somehow in that web the inspired little spider managed to put into form her longings and desires so intensely that she projected, she communicated—and so that each person looking at it fancied he saw a suggestion of his own heart's desire pictured there. It's really a sort of reverse-action Rorschach ink-blot!"

"And all this just because she wants a mate?"

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"Inspired by stimulus, release from spiderish inhibitions, and maybe sparked by something that was in *your* blood serum, yes."

Cathy was blushing. "I guess I gave myself away by saying that I saw a valentine, huh?" She turned, but Dr. Will caught her.

"And I'm damn glad you did," he said softly. "Maybe I'd have seen one too, if I hadn't been so busy watching others' reactions. I've been blind in many ways, Cathy dear." He took off his glasses and kissed her. It was high time, Cathy thought as she kissed back. Then they went off to try to find a mate for Zilla. What happened after that is their own business.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot

It was Ferdinand Feghoot who discovered Yip Quong and persuaded him to move to the Thirty-Ninth Century.

"Mr. Yip," he informed the Time Travelers Club, "is the greatest natural psychokineticist in all history. He put every Chinese laundry in Milwaukee 1912 out of business. He hired no help. He needed no plant or equipment. He simply sat down before a mountain of dirty old laundry, and *wished* it all clean, ironed, sorted, and wrapped. He closed his eyes for a moment—and pop! it was done. In no time at all he'd made millions of dollars."

Old Dr. Gropius Volkswagen rose to his feet. "Then why is he here?" he demanded unpleasantly. "Why did he not stay where he was so happy and rich?"

"He was rich but not happy," Feghoot answered. "His fellow Chinese weren't at all fond of him. Some of them snubbed him completely, and none of them ever invited him anywhere."

"That is strange. The Chinese worshipped commercial success. Did he commit some unforgivable crime? Did he violate some precept of maybe Confucius?"

"Oh, no," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "It was nothing like that. It was just that they found him a little too wishy-washy."

GRENDEL BRIARTON

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Poul Anderson is perhaps the leading practitioner of the roaring adventure story in science fiction. This is by no means the only form at which he excels, but by and large the best assaults on bastions, the finest furious encounters of enemy space armadas, the most glorious games of glory, are all likely to have the Anderson byline. Mr. Anderson—who is tallish, lean, reasonably quiet himself, and fond of beer, ballads, books, and boats—tells here a rousing tale of high and salty adventure, when a great aerial power of a reviving future meets an ingenious naval force from halfway around an otherwise peaceful world.

THE SKY PEOPLE

a novelet

by POUL ANDERSON

THE ROVER FLEET GOT THERE just before sunrise. From its height, five thousand feet, the land was bluish gray, smoked with mists. Irrigation canals caught the first light as if they were full of mercury. Westward the ocean gleamed, its far edge dissolved into purple and a few stars.

Loklann sunna Holber leaned over the gallery rail of his flagship and pointed a telescope at the city. It sprang to view as a huddle of walls, flat roofs, and square watchtowers. The cathedral spires were tinted rose by a hidden sun. No barrage balloons were up. It must be true what rumor said, that the Perio had abandoned its outlying provinces to their fate. So the portable wealth of Meyco would have flowed into S' Antón, for safekeeping—which meant that the place was well worth a raid. Loklann grinned.

Robra sunna Stam, the *Buf-*

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falo's mate, spoke. "Best we come down to about two thousand," he suggested. "Just to be sure the men aren't blown sideways, to the wrong side of the town walls."

"Aye." The skipper nodded his helmeted head. "Two thousand, so be it."

Their voices seemed oddly loud up here, where only the wind and a creak of rigging had broken silence. The sky around the rovers was dusky immensity, tinged red gold in the east. Dew lay on the gallery deck. But when the long wooden horns blew signals, it was somehow not an interruption, nor was the distant shouting of orders from other vessels, thud of crew fleet, clatter of windlasses and hand-operated compressor pumps. To a Sky Man, those sounds belonged in the upper air.

Five great craft spiraled smoothly downward. The first sunrays flashed off gilt figureheads, bold on sharp gondola prows, and rioted along the extravagant designs painted on gas bags. Sails and rudders were unbelievably white across the last western darkness.

"Hullo, there," said Loklann. He had been studying the harbor through his telescope. "Something new. What could it be?"

He offered the tube to Robra, who held it to his remaining eye. Within the glass circle lay a stone dock and warehouses, centuries old, from the days of the Perio's greatness. Less than a fourth of their capacity was used now. The normal clutter of wretched little fishing craft, a single coasting schooner . . . and yes, by Oktai the Stormbringer, a monster thing, bigger than a whale, seven masts that were impossibly tall!

"I don't know." The mate lowered the telescope. "A foreigner? But where from? Not in all this continent—"

"I never saw any arrangement like that," said Loklann. "Square sails on the topmasts, fore-and-aft below." He stroked his short beard. It burned like spun copper in the morning light; he was one of the fairhaired blue-eyed men, rare even among the Sky People and unheard of elsewhere. "Of course," he said, "we're no experts on water craft. We only see them in passing." A not unamiable contempt rode his words: sailors made good slaves, at least, but naturally the only fit vehicle for a fighting man was a rover abroad and a horse at home.

"Probably a trader," he decided. "We'll capture it if possible."

He turned his attention to more urgent problems. He had no map of S' Antón, had never even seen it before. This was the farthest south any Sky People had yet gone plundering, and almost as far as any had ever visited—in by-

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gone days aircraft were still too primitive and the Perio too strong. Thus Loklann must scan the city from far above, through drifting white vapors, and make his plan on the spot. Nor could it be very complicated, for he had only signal flags and a barrel-chested hollerer with a megaphone to pass orders to the other vessels.

"That big plaza in front of the temple," he murmured. "Our contingent will land there. Let the *Stormcloud* men tackle that big building east of it . . . see . . . it looks like a chief's dwelling. Over there, along the north wall, typical barracks and parade ground —*Coyote* can deal with the soldiers. Let the *Witch of Heaven* men land on the docks, seize the seaward gun emplacements and that strange vessel, then join the attack on the garrison. *Fire Elk's* crew should land inside the east city gate and send a detachment to the south gate, to bottle in the civilian population. Having occupied the plaza, I'll send reinforcements wherever they're needed. All clear?"

He snapped down his goggles. Some of the big men crowding about him wore chain armor, but he preferred a cuirass of hardened leather, Mong style; it was nearly as strong and a lot lighter. He was armed with a pistol, but had more faith in his battle ax. An archer could shoot almost as fast as a gun, as accurately—and firearms were getting fabulously expensive to operate as sulfur sources dwindled.

He felt a tightness which was like being a little boy again, opening presents on Midwinter Morning. Oktai knew what treasures he would find, of gold, cloth, tools, slaves, of battle and high deeds and eternal fame. Possibly death. Someday he was sure to die in combat: he had sacrificed so much to his josses, they wouldn't grudge him war-death and a chance to be reborn as a Sky Man.

"Let's go!" he said.

He sprang up on a gallery rail and over. For a moment the world pinwheeled, now the city was on top and now again his *Buffalo* streaked past. Then he pulled the ripcord and his harness slammed him to steadiness. Around him it bloomed with scarlet parachutes. He gauged the wind and tugged a line, guiding himself down.

II

Don Miwel Carabán, calde of S' Antón d' Inio, arranged a lavish feast for his Maurai guests. It was not only that this was a historic occasion, which might even mark a turning point in the long decline. (Don Miwel, being that rare combination, a practical man who could read, knew that the withdrawal of Perio troops to

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Brasil twenty years ago was not a "temporary adjustment." They would never come back. The outer provinces were on their own.) But the strangers must be convinced that they had found a nation rich, strong, and basically civilized: that it was worthwhile visiting the Meycan coasts to trade, ultimately to make alliance against the northern savages.

The banquet lasted till nearly midnight. Though some of the old irrigation canals had choked up and never been repaired, so that cactus and rattlesnake housed in abandoned pueblos, Meyco Province was still fertile. The slant-eyed Mong horsemen from Tekkas had killed off innumerable peons when they raided five years back; wooden pitchforks and obsidian hoes were small use against saber and arrow. It would be another decade before population was back to normal and the periodic famines resumed. Thus Don Miwel offered many courses, beef, spiced ham, olives, fruits, wines, nuts, coffee, which last the Sea People were unfamiliar with and didn't much care for, et cetera. Entertainment followed—music, jugglers, a fencing exhibition by some of the young nobles.

At this point the surgeon of the *Dolphin,* who was rather drunk, offered to show an Island dance. Muscular beneath tattoos, his brown form went through a series of contortions which pursed the lips of the dignified Dons. Miwel himself remarked, "It reminds me somewhat of our peons' fertility rites," with a strained courtesy that suggested to Captain Ruori Rangi Lohannaso that peons had an altogether different and not very nice culture.

The surgeon threw back his queue and grinned. "Now let's bring the ship's wahines ashore to give them a real hula," he said in Maurai-Ingliss.

"No," answered Ruori. "I fear we may have shocked them already. The proverb goes, 'When in the Solmon Islands, darken your skin.'"

"I don't think they know how to have *any* fun," complained the doctor.

"We don't yet know what the taboos are," warned Ruori. "Let us be as grave, then, as these spike-bearded men, and not laugh or make love until we are back on shipboard among our wahines."

"But it's stupid! Shark-toothed Nan eat me if I'm going to—"

"Your ancestors are ashamed," said Ruori. It was about as sharp a rebuke as you could give a man whom you didn't intend to fight. He softened his tone to take out the worst sting, but the doctor had to shut up. Which he did, mumbling an apology and retiring with his blushes to a dark corner beneath faded murals.

Ruori turned back to his host.

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"I beg your pardon, S'ñor," he said, using the local tongue. "My men's command of Español is even less than my own."

"Of course." Don Miwel's lean black-clad form made a stiff little bow. It brought his sword up, ludicrously like a tail. Ruori heard a smothered snort of laughter from one of his officers. And yet, thought the captain, were long trousers and ruffled shirt any worse than sarong, sandals, and clan tattoos? Different customs, no more. You had to sail the Maurai Federation, from Awaii to his own N'Zealann and west to Mlaya, before you appreciated how big this planet was and how much of it a mystery.

"You speak our language most excellently, S'ñor," said Doñita Tresa Carabán. She smiled. "Perhaps better than we, since you studied texts centuries old before embarking, and the Español has changed greatly since."

Ruori smiled back. Don Miwel's daughter was worth it. The rich black dress caressed a figure as good as any in the world; and, while the Sea People paid less attention to a woman's face, he saw that hers was proud and well-formed, her father's eagle beak softened to a curve, luminous eyes and hair the color of midnight oceans. It was too bad these Meycans—the nobles, at least—thought a girl should be reserved solely for the husband they eventually picked for her. He would have liked her to swap her pearls and silver for a lei and go out in a ship's canoe, just the two of them, to watch the sunrise and make love.

However—

"In such company," he murmured, "I am stimulated to learn the modern language as fast as possible."

She refrained from coquetting with her fan, a local habit the Sea People found alternately hilarious and irritating. But her lashes fluttered. They were very long, and her eyes, he saw, were gold-flecked green. "You are learning cab'llero manners just as fast, S'ñor," she said.

"Do not call our language 'modern', I pray you," interrupted a scholarly looking man in a long robe. Ruori recognized Bispo Don Carlos Ermosillo, a high priest of that Esu Carito who seemed cognate with the Maurai Lesu Haristi. "Not modern, but corrupt. I too have studied old books, printed before the War of Judgment. Our ancestors spoke the true Español. Our version of it is as distorted as our present-day society." He sighed. "But what can one expect, when even among the well-born, not one in ten can write his own name?"

"There was more literacy in the high days of the Perio," said Don Miwel. "You should have visited us a hundred years ago,

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S'ñor Captain, and seen what our race was capable of."

"Yet what was the Perio itself but a successor state?" asked the Bispo bitterly. "It unified a large area, gave law and order for a while, but what did it create that was new? Its course was the same sorry tale as a thousand kingdoms before, and therefore the same judgment has fallen on it."

Doñita Tresa crossed herself. Even Ruori, who held a degree in engineering as well as navigation, was shocked. "Not atomics?" he exclaimed.

"What? Oh. The old weapons, which destroyed the old world. No, of course not." Don Carlos shook his head. "But in our more limited way, we have been as stupid and sinful as the legendary forefathers, and the results have been parallel. You may call it human greed or el Dío's punishment as you will; I think the two mean much the same thing."

Ruori looked closely at the priest. "I should like to speak with you further, S'ñor," he said, hoping it was the right title. "Men who know history, rather than myth, are rare these days."

"By all means," said Don Carlos. "I should be honored."

Doñita Tresa shifted on light, impatient feet. "It is customary to dance," she said.

Her father laughed. "Ah, yes. The young ladies have been getting very impatient, I am sure. Time enough to resume formal discussions tomorrow, S'ñor Captain. Now let the music begin!"

He signalled. The orchestra struck up. Some instruments were quite like those of the Maurai, others wholly unfamiliar. The scale itself was different . . . they had something like it in Stralia, but— A hand fell on Ruori's arm. He looked down at Tresa. "Since you do not ask me to dance," she said, "may I be so immodest as to ask you?"

"What does 'immodest' mean?" he inquired.

She blushed and tried to explain, without success. Ruori decided it was another local concept which the Sea People lacked. By that time the Meycan girls and their cavaliers were out on the ballroom floor. He studied them for a moment. "The motions are unknown to me," he said, "but I think I could soon learn."

She slipped into his arms. It was a pleasant contact, even though nothing would come of it. "You do very well," she said after a minute. "Are all your folk so graceful?"

Only later did he realize it was a compliment for which he should have thanked her; being an Islander, he took it at face value as a question and replied, "Most of us spend a great deal of time on the water. A sense of balance and rhythm must be developed or one is likely to fall into the sea."

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She wrinkled her nose. "Oh stop," she laughed. "You're as solemn as S' Osé in the cathedral."

Ruori grinned back. He was a tall young man, brown as all his race but with the gray eyes which many bore in memory of Ingliss ancestors. Being a N'Zealanner, he was not tattooed as lavishly as some Federation men. On the other hand, he had woven a whalebone filigree into his queue, his sarong was the finest batik, and he had added thereto a fringed shirt. His knife, without which a Maurai felt obscenely helpless, was in contrast: old, shabby until you saw the blade, a tool.

"I must see this god S' Osé," he said. "Will you show me? Or no, I would not have eyes for a mere statue."

"How long will you stay?" she asked.

"As long as we can. We are supposed to explore the whole Meycan coast. Hitherto the only Maurai contact with the Meriken continent has been one voyage from Awaii to Calforni. They found desert and a few savages. We have heard from Okkaidan traders that there are forests still further north, where yellow and white men strive against each other. But what lies south of Calforni was unknown to us until this expedition was sent out. Perhaps you can tell us what to expect in Su-Merika."

"Little enough by now," she sighed. "even in Brasil."

"Ah, but lovely roses bloom, in Meyco."

Her humor returned. "And flattering words in N'Zealann." she chuckled.

"Far from it. We are notoriously straightforward. Except, of course, when yarning about voyages we have made."

"What yarns will you tell about this one?"

"Not many, lest all the young men of the Federation come crowding here. But I will take you aboard my ship, Doñita, and show you to the compass. Thereafter it will always point toward S' Antón d' Inio. You will be, so to speak, my compass rose."

Somewhat to his surprise, she understood, and laughed. She led him across the floor, supple between his hands.

Thereafter, as the night wore on, they danced together as much as decency allowed, or a bit more, and various foolishness which concerned no one else passed between them. Toward sunrise the orchestra was dismissed and the guests, hiding yawns behind well-bred hands, began to take their departure.

"How dreary to stand and receive farewells," whispered Tresa. "Let them think I went to bed already." She took Ruori's hand and slipped behind a column and so out on to a balcony. An old

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serving woman, stationed to act as duenna for couples that wandered out, had wrapped up in her mantle against the cold and fallen asleep. Otherwise the two were alone among jasmines. Mists floated around the palace and blurred the city; far off rang the *"Todos buen"* of pikemen tramping the outer walls. Westward the balcony faced darkness, where the last stars glittered. The seven tall topmasts of the Maurai *Dolphin* caught the earliest sun and glowed.

Tresa shivered and stood close to Ruori. They did not speak for a while.

"Remember us," she said at last, very low. "When you are back with your own happier people, do not forget us here."

"How could I?" he answered, no longer in jest.

"You have so much more than we," she said wistfully. "You have told me how your ships can sail unbelievably fast, almost into the wind. How your fishers always fill their nets, how your whale ranchers keep herds that darken the water, how you even farm the ocean for food and fiber and—" she fingered the shimmering material of his shirt. "You told me this was made by craft out of fishbones. You told me that every family has its own spacious house and every member of it, almost, his own boat . . . that even small children on the loneliest island can read, and own printed books . . . that you have none of the sicknesses which destroy us . . . that no one hungers and all are free— Oh, do not forget us, you on whom el Dío has smiled!"

She stopped, then, embarrassed. He could see how her head lifted and nostrils dilated, as if resenting him. After all, he thought, she came from a breed which for centuries had given, not received charity.

So he chose his words with care: "It has been less our virtue than our good fortune, Doñita. We suffered less than most in the War of Judgment, and the fact of Judgment, and the fact of our being chiefly Islanders prevented our population from outrunning the sea's rich ability to feed us. So we—no, we did not retain any lost ancestral arts. There are none. But we did recreate an ancient attitude, a way of thinking, which has made the difference—science."

She crossed herself. "The atom!" she breathed, drawing from him.

"No, no, Doñita," he protested. "So many nations we have discovered lately believe that science was the cause of the old world's ruin. Or else they think that it was a collection of cut-and-dried formulas for making tall buildings or talking at a distance. But neither belief is true. The scientific method is only a means of learning. It is a . . . a perpetual starting afresh. And that is why

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you people here in Meyco can help us as much as we can help you, why we have sought you out and will come knocking hopefully at your doors again in the future."

She frowned, though something began to glow within her. "I do not understand," she said.

He cast about for an example. At last he pointed to a series of small holes in the balcony rail. "What used to be here?" he asked.

"Why . . . I do not know. It has always been like that."

"I think I can tell you. I have seen similar things elsewhere. It was a wrought-iron grille. But it was pulled out a long time ago and made into weapons or tools. No?"

"Quite likely," she admitted. "Iron and copper have grown very scarce. We have to send caravans across the whole land, to Támico ruins, in great peril from bandits and barbarians, to fetch our metal. Time was when there were iron rails within a kilometer of this place. Don Carlos has told me."

He nodded. "Just so. The ancients exhausted the world. They mined the ores, burned the oil and coal, eroded the land until there was nothing left. I exaggerate, of course. There are still mineral deposits here and there. But not enough. The old civilization used up all the capital, so to speak. Now sufficient forest and soil have come back so the world could try to reconstruct the machine culture—except that there aren't enough minerals and fuels. For centuries men have been forced to tear up the old artifacts, if there was to be any metal at all. By and large, the knowledge of the ancients hasn't been lost; it has simply become unusable, because we are so much poorer than they."

He leaned forward, earnestly. "But knowledge and discovery do not depend on wealth," he said. "Perhaps because we did not have so much metal to cannibalize in the Islands, we turned elsewhere. The scientific method is just as applicable to wind and sun and living matter as it was to oil, iron, or uranium. By studying genetics, we learned how to create seaweeds, plankton, fish that would serve our purposes. Scientific forest management gives us adequate timber, organic-synthesis bases, some fuel. The sun pours down energy which we know how to concentrate and use. Wood, ceramics, even stone can replace metal for most purposes. The wind, through such principles as the airfoil or the Venturi law or the Hilsch tube, supplies force, heat, refrigeration; the tides can be harnessed. Even in its present early stage, paramathematical psychology helps control population, as well as— No, I am talking like an engineer now, falling into my own language. I apologize.

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"What I wanted to say was, that if we can only have the help of other people, such as yourselves, on a world-wide scale, we can match our ancestors, or surpass them . . . not in their own ways, which were often short-sighted and wasteful, but in achievements uniquely ours—"

His voice trailed off. She wasn't listening. She stared over his head, into the air, and horror stood on her face.

Then trumpets howled on battlements, and the cathedral bells crashed to life.

"What the nine devils!" Ruori turned on his heel and looked up. The zenith had become quite blue. Lazily over S' Antón floated five orca shapes. The new sun glared off a jagged heraldry painted along their flanks. He estimated dizzily that each of them must be three hundred feet long.

Blood-colored things petaled out below them and drifted down upon the city.

"The Sky People!" said a small broken croak behind him. "Sant'sima Marí, pray for us now!"

III

Loklann hit flagstones, rolled over, and bounced to his feet. Beside him a carved horseman presided over fountain waters. For just an instant he admired the stone, almost alive; they had nothing like that in Canyon, Zona, Corado, any of the mountain kingdoms. And the temple facing this plaza was white skywardness.

The square had been busy, farmers and handicrafters setting up their booths for a market day. Most of them scattered in noisy panic. But one big man roared, snatched up a stone hammer, and dashed in his rags to meet Loklann. He was covering the flight of a young woman, probably his wife, who held a baby in her arms. Through the shapeless sack dress Loklann saw that her figure wasn't bad. She would fetch a price when the Mong slave dealer next visited Canyon. So could her husband, but there wasn't time now, still encumbered with a chute—Loklann whipped out his pistol and fired. The man fell to one knee, gaped at the blood seeping between fingers clutched to his belly, and collapsed. Loklann flung off his harness. His boots thudded after the woman. She shrieked when fingers closed on her arm and tried to wriggle free, but the brat hampered her. Loklann shoved her toward the temple. Robra was already on its steps.

"Post a guard!" yelled the skipper. "We may as well keep all the prisoners in here, till we're ready to plunder it."

An old man in priest's robes tottered to the door. He held up one of the cross-shaped Meycan

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josses, as if to bar the way. Robra brained him with an ax blow, kicked the body off the stairs, and urged the woman inside.

It sleeted armed men. Loklann winded his oxhorn bugle, rallying them. A counterattack could be expected any minute. . . . Yes, now.

A troop of Meycan cavalry clanged into view. They were young, proud-looking men in baggy pants, leather breastplate and plumed helmet, blowing cloak, fire-hardened wooden lances but steel sabers. Very much like the yellow nomads of Tekkas, whom they had fought for centuries. But so had the Sky People. Loklann pounded to the head of his line, where his standard bearer had raised the Lightning Flag. Half the *Buffalo's* crew fitted together sections of pike tipped with edged ceramic, grounded the butts, and waited. The charge crested upon them. Their pikes slanted down. Some horses spitted themselves, others reared back screaming. The pikemen jabbed at their riders. The second paratroop line stepped in, ax and sword and hamstringing knife. For a few minutes murder boiled. The Meycans broke. They did not flee, but they retreated in confusion. And then the Canyon bows began to snap.

Presently only dead and hurt cluttered the square. Loklann moved briskly among the latter. Those who weren't too badly wounded were hustled into the temple. Might as well collect all possible slaves and cull them out later.

From afar he heard a dull boom. "Cannon," said Robra, joining him. "At the army barracks."

"Well, let the artillery have its fun, till our boys get in among 'em," said Loklann sardonically.

"Sure, sure." Robra looked nervous. "I wish they'd let us hear from them, though. Just standing around here isn't so good."

"It won't be long," predicted Loklann.

Nor was it. A runner with a broken arm staggered to him. "*Stormcloud,*" he gasped. "The big building you sent us against . . . full of swordsmen . . . they repulsed us at the door—"

"Huh! I thought it was just the king's house," said Loklann. He laughed. "Well, maybe the king was giving a party. Come on, then, I'll go see for myself. Robra, take over here." His finger swept out thirty men to accompany him. They jogged down streets empty and silent except for their own bootfalls and weapon-jingle. The housefolk must be huddled terrified behind those blank walls. So much the easier to round them up later, when the fighting was done and the looting began.

A roar broke loose. Loklann led

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a dash around a last corner. Opposite him he saw the palace, an old building, red-tiled roof and mellow walls and many glass windows. The *Stormcloud* men were fighting at the main door. Their dead and wounded from the last attack lay thick.

Loklann took in the situation at a glance. "It wouldn't occur to those lardheads to send a detachment through some side entrance, would it?" he groaned. "Jonak, take fifteen of our boys and batter in a lesser door and hit the rear of that line. The rest of you help me keep it busy meanwhile."

He raised his red-spattered ax. "A Canyon!" he yelled. "A Canyon!" His followers bellowed behind him and they ran to battle.

The last charge had just reeled away bloody and breathless. Half a dozen Meycans stood in the wide doorway. They were all nobles: grim men with goatees and waxed mustaches, in formal black, red cloaks wrapped as a shield on their left arms and long slim swords in their right hands. Behind them stood others, ready to take the place of the fallen.

"A Canyon!" shouted Loklann as he rushed.

"Quel Dío wela!" cried a tall grizzled Don. A gold chain of office hung around his neck. His blade snaked forth.

Loklann flung up his ax and parried. The Don was fast, riposting with a lunge that ended on the raider's breast. But hardened six-ply leather turned the point. Loklann's men crowded on either side, reckless of thrusts, and hewed. He struck the enemy sword, it spun from the owner's graps. *"Ah, no Don Miwel!"* cried a young person beside the calde. The older man snarled and threw out his hands and somehow clamped them on Loklann's ax. He yanked it away with a troll's strength. Loklann stared into eyes that said death. Don Miwel raised the ax. Loklann drew his pistol and fired point blank.

As Don Miwel toppled, Loklann caught him, pulled off the gold chain, and threw it around his own neck. Straightening, he met a savage thrust. It glanced off his helmet. He got his ax back, planted his feet firmly, and smote.

The defending line buckled.

Clamor lifted behind Loklann. He turned and saw weapons gleam beyond his own men's shoulders. With a curse he realized—there had been more people in the palace than these holding the main door. The rest had sallied out the rear and were now on his back!

A point pierced his thigh. He felt no more than sting, but rage flapped black before his eyes. "Be reborn as the swine you are!" he roared. Half unaware, he thundered loose. Somehow he

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cleared a space for himself, lurched aside and oversaw the battle.

The newcomers were mostly palace guards, judging from their gaily striped uniforms, pikes and machetes. But there were allies, a dozen men such as Loklann had never seen or heard of. They had the brown skin and black hair of Injuns, but their faces were more like a white man's; intricate blue designs covered their bodies, which were clad only in wrap-arounds and flower wreaths. They wielded knives and clubs with wicked skill.

Loklann tore his trouser leg open to look at his wound. It wasn't much. More serious was the beating his men were taking. He saw Mork sunna Brenn rush with uplifted sword at one of the dark strangers, a big man who had added a rich-looking blouse to his skirt. Mork had killed four men at home for certain, in lawful fights, and no one knew how many abroad. The dark man waited, a knife between his teeth, hands hanging loose. As the sword came down, the dark man simply wasn't there. Grinning around his knife, he chopped at the sword wrist with the edge of a hand. Loklann distinctly heard bones crack. Mork yelled. The foreigner hit him in the Adams' apple. Mork went to his knees, spat blood, caved in, and was still. Another Sky Man charged, ax aloft. The stranger—somehow—avoided the weapon, caught the moving body on his hip, and helped it along. The Sky Man hit the pavement with his head and did not move again.

Now Loklann saw that the newcomers were a ring around others who did not fight. Women. By Oktai and man-eating Ulagu, these bastards were leading out all the women in the palace! And the fight against them had broken up, surly raiders stood back holding their wounds.

Loklann ran forward. "A Canyon! A Canyon!" he shouted.

"Ruori Rangi Lohannaso," said the big stranger politely. He rapped a string of orders. His party began to move away.

"Hit them, you scum!" bawled Loklann. His men rallied and straggled after. Rearguard pikes prodded them back. Loklann led a rush to the front of the hollow square.

The big man saw him coming; gray eyes focused on the calde's chain and became full of winter. "So you killed Don Miwel," said Ruori in Español. Loklann understood him, having learned the tongue from prisoners and concubines during many raids further north. "You lousy son of a skua."

Loklann's pistol came out. Ruori's hand blurred. Suddenly the knife stood in the Sky Man's right biceps. He dropped his gun.

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"I'll want that back!" shouted Ruori. Then, to his followers: "Come, to the ship."

Loklann stared at blood rivering down his arm. He heard a clatter as the refugees broke through the weary Canyon line. Jonak's party appeared in the main door – which was now empty, its surviving defenders having left with Ruori.

A man approached Loklann, who still regarded his arm. "Shall we go after 'em, skipper?" he said, almost timidly. "Jonak can lead us after 'em."

"No," said Loklann.

"But they must be escorting a hundred women. A lot of young women too."

Loklann shook himself, like a dog coming out of a deep cold stream. "No. I want to find the medic and get this wound stitched. Then we'll have a lot else to do. We can settle with those outlanders later, if the chance comes. Man, we've a city to sack!"

IV

There were dead men scattered on the wharfs, some burned. They looked oddly small beneath the warehouses, like rag dolls tossed away by some weeping child. Cannon fumes lingered to bite nostrils.

Atel Hamid Seraio, the mate, who had been left aboard the *Dolphin* with the enlisted crew, led a band to meet Ruori. His salute was in the Island manner, so casual that even at this moment some of the Meycans looked shocked. "We were about to go after you, captain," he said.

Ruori looked toward that forest which was the *Dolphin's* rig. "What happened here?" he asked.

"A band of those devils landed up that way, near the battery. They took the emplacements while we were still wondering what it was all about. Some of them went off toward that racket in the north quarter, I believe where the army lives. But the rest of the gang attacked us. Well, with our gunwale ten feet above the dock, and us trained to repel pirates, they didn't have much luck. I gave them a dose of flame."

Ruori winced from the blackened corpses. Doubtless they had deserved it, but he didn't like the idea of pumping burning blubber oil across live men.

"Too bad they didn't try it from the seaward side," added Atel with a sigh. "We've got such a lovely harpoon catapult. I used one just like it several years ago off Hinja, when a Sinese buccaneer came too close. His junk sounded like a whale."

"Men aren't whales!" snapped Ruori.

"All right, captain, all right, all right." Atel backed away from his

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violence, a little frightened. "No ill-speaking meant."

Ruori recollected himself and folded his hands. "I spoke in needless anger," he said formally. "I laugh at myself."

"It's nothing, captain. As I was saying, we beat them off and they finally withdrew. I imagine they'll be back with reinforcements. What shall we do?"

"That's what I don't know," said Ruori in a bleak tone. He turned to the Meycans, who stood with stricken uncomprehending faces. "Your pardon is prayed, Dons and Doñitas," he said in Español. "He was only relating to me what had happened."

"Don't apologize!" Tresa Carabán spoke, stepping out ahead of the men. Some of them looked a bit offended, but they were too tired and stunned to reprove her forwardness, and to Ruori it was only natural that a woman act as freely as a man. "You saved our lives, captain. More than our lives."

He wondered what was worse than death, then nodded. Slavery, of course, ropes and whips and a lifetime's unfree toil in a strange land. His eyes dwelt upon her, the long hair disheveled past smooth shoulders, gown ripped, weariness and a streak of tears across her face. He wondered if she knew her father was dead. She held herself straight and regarded him with an odd defiance.

"We are uncertain what to do," he said awkwardly. "We are only fifty men. Can we help your city?"

A young nobleman, swaying on his feet, replied: "No. The city is done. You can take these ladies to safety, that is all."

Tresa protested: "You are not surrendering already, S'ñor Dónoju!"

"No, Doñita," the young man breathed. "But I hope I can be shriven before returning to fight, for I am a dead man."

"Come aboard," said Ruori curtly.

He led the way up the gangplank. Liliu, one of the ship's five wahines, ran to meet him. She threw arms about his neck and cried, "I feared you were all slain!"

"Not yet." Ruori disengaged her as gently as possible. He noticed Tresa standing stiff, glaring at them both. Puzzlement came—did these curious Meycans expect a crew to embark on a voyage of months without taking a few girls along?—then he decided that the wahines' clothing, being much like his men's, was against local mores. To Nan with their silly prejudices. But it hurt that Tresa drew away from him.

The other Meycans stared about them. Not all had toured the ship when she first arrived. They looked in bewilderment at lines and spars, down fathoms of deck to the harpoon catapult, cap-

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stans, bowsprit, and back at the sailors. The Maurai grinned encouragingly. So far most of them looked on this as a lark. Men who skindove after sharks, for fun, or who sailed outrigger canoes alone across a thousand ocean miles to pay a visit, were not put out by a little fight.

But they had not talked with grave Don Miwel and merry Don Wan and gentle Bispo Ermosillo, and then seen those people dead on a dance floor, thought Ruori in bitterness.

The Meycan women huddled together, ladies and servants, to weep among each other. The palace formed a solid rank around them. The nobles, and Tresa, followed Ruori up on the poop deck.

"Now," he said, "let us talk. Who are these bandits?"

"The Sky People," whispered Tresa.

"I can see that." Ruori cocked an eye on the aircraft patrolling overhead. They had the sinister beauty of as many barracuda. Here and there columns of smoke reached up toward them. "But *who* are they? Where from?"

"They are Nor-Merikans," she answered in a dry little voice, as if afraid to give it color. "From the wild highlands around the Corado River, the Grand Canyon it has cut for itself—mountaineers. There is a story that they were driven from the eastern plains by Mong invaders, a long time ago; but they grew strong again in the hills and deserts, so they have defeated some Mong tribes and become friendly with others. For a hundred years they have harried our northern borders This is the first time they have ventured so far south. We never expected them — I suppose their spies learned most of our soldiers are up by the Río Gran, chasing a rebel force—they sailed southwesterly, above our land—" She shivered.

The young Dónoju spat: "They are heathen dogs! They know nothing but to rob and burn and kill!" He sagged. "What have we done that they are loosed on us?"

Ruori rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "They can't be quite such savages," he murmured. "Those blimps are better than anything my own Federation has tried to make. The fabric . . . some tricky synthetic? It must be, or it wouldn't contain hydrogen any length of time. Surely they don't use helium! But for hydrogen production on that scale, you need industry. A good empirical chemistry, at least. They might even electrolyze it . . . good Lesu!"

He realized he had been talking to himself in his home language. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I was wondering what we might do. This ship carries no flying vessels."

Again he looked upward. Atel handed him his binoculars. He

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focused on the nearest blimp. The huge gas bag and the gondola beneath—itself as big as many a Maurai ship—formed an aerodynamically clean unit. The gondola seemed to be light, woven cane about a wooden frame, but strong. Three-fourths of the way up from its keel a sort of gallery ran clear around, on which the crew might walk and work. At intervals along its rail stood muscle-powered machines. Some must be for hauling, but others suggested catapults. So the blimps of various chiefs fought each other occasionally, in the northern kingdoms. That might be worth knowing. The Federation's political psychologists were skilled at the divide-and-rule game. But for now . . .

The motive power was extraordinarily interesting. Near the gondola bows two lateral spars reached out for some fifty feet, one above the other. They supported two pivoted frames on either side, to which square sails were bent. A similar pair of spars pierced the after hull: eight sails in all. Shark-fin control surfaces were braced to the gas bag. Sails and rudders were trimmed by lines running through block and tackle to windlasses on the gallery. By altering their set, it should be possible to steer at least several points to windward. And, yes, the air moves in different directions at different levels. A blimp could descend by pumping out enough cells in its gas bag, compressing the hydrogen into storage tanks; it could rise by reinflating or by dropping ballast. (Though the latter trick would be reserved for home stretches, when leakage had depleted the gas supply.) Between sails, rudders, and its ability to find a reasonably favoring wind, such a blimp could go roving across several thousand miles, with a payload of no few tons. Oh, a lovely craft!

Ruori lowered his glasses. "Hasn't the Perio built any air vessels, to fight back?" he asked.

"No," mumbled one of the Meycans. "All we ever had was balloons. We don't know how to make a fabric which will hold the lifting-gas long enough, or how to control the flight, so—" His voice trailed off.

"And being a non-scientific culture, you never thought of doing systematic research to learn those tricks," said Ruori.

Tresa, who had been staring at her city, whirled about upon him. "It's easy enough for you!" she screamed. "You haven't stood off Mong in the north and Raucanians in the south for century after century . . . you haven't had to spend twenty years and ten thousand lives making canals and aqueducts, so a few less people would starve . . . you aren't burdened with a peon majority who

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can only work, who cannot look after themselves because they have never been taught how because their existence is too much of a burden for our land to afford it . . . it's easy enough for you to float about with your shirtless doxies and poke fun at us! What would *you* have done, S'ñor almighty captain?"

"Be still," reproved young Dónoju. "He saved our lives."

"So far!" she said, through teeth and tears. One small dancing shoe stamped the deck.

For a bemused moment, irrelevantly, Ruori wondered what a doxie was. It sounded uncomplimentary. Could she mean the wahines? But was there a more honorable way for a woman to earn a good dowry than by hazarding her life, side by side with the men of her people on a mission of discovery and civilization? What did Tresa expect to tell her grandchildren about on rainy nights?

Then he wondered further why she should disturb him so. He had noticed it before, in some of the Meycans, an almost terrifying intensity between man and wife, as if a spouse was somehow more than a respected friend and partner. But what other relationship was possible? A psychological specialist might know; Ruori was lost.

He shook an angry head, to clear it, and said aloud: "This is no time for inurbanity." He had to use a Español word with not quite the same connotation. "We must decide. Are you certain there is no hope of repelling the pirates?"

"Not unless S' Antón himself passes a miracle," said Dónoju in a dead voice.

Then, snapping erect: "There is only one thing you can do for us, S'ñor. If you will leave now, with the women— There are high-born ladies among them, who must not be sold into captivity and disgrace. Bear them south to Port Wanawato, where the calde will look after their welfare."

"I do not like to run off," said Ruori, looking at the men fallen on the wharf.

"Sñor, these are *ladies!* In el Dío's name, have mercy on them!"

Ruori studied the taut, bearded faces. He did owe them a great deal of hospitality, and he could see no other way he might ever repay it. "If you wish," he said slowly. "What of yourselves?"

The young noble bowed as if to a king. "Our thanks and prayers will go with you, my lord captain. We men, of course, will now return to the battle." He stood up and barked in a parade-ground voice: "Atten-tion! Form ranks!"

A few swift kisses passed on the main deck, and then the men of Meyco had crossed the gang-

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plank and tramped into their city.

Ruori beat the taffrail with a clenched fist. "If there was some way," he mumbled. "If I could do something!" Almost hopefully: "Do you think the bandits might attack us?"

"Only if you remain here," said Tresa. Her eyes were chips of green ice. "Would to Marí you had not pledged yourself to sail!"

"If they come after us at sea—"

"I do not think they will. You carry a hundred women and a few trade goods. The Sky People will have their pick of ten thousand women, as many men, and all our city's treasures. Why should they take the trouble to pursue you?"

"Aye . . . aye. . . ."

"Go," she said coldly. "You dare not linger."

He faced her. It had been like a blow. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Do you think the Maurai are cowards?"

She hesitated. Then, with a stubborn, reluctant honesty: "No."

"So why do you scoff me?"

"Oh, go away!" She knelt by the rail, bowed head in arms and surrendered to herself.

Ruori left her and gave his orders. Men scrambled into the rigging. Furled canvas broke loose and cracked in a young wind. Beyond the jetty, the ocean glittered blue, with small whitecaps; gulls skimmed across heaven. Ruori saw only the glimpses he had had before, as he led the retreat from the palace.

A weaponless man, lying with his head split open. A girl, hardly twelve years old, who screamed as two raiders carried her into an alley. An aged man fleeing in terror, zigzagging, while four archers took potshots at him and howled laughter when he fell transfixed and dragged himself along on his hands. A woman sitting dumb in the street, her dress torn, next to a baby whose brains had been dashed out. A little statue in a niche, a holy image, with a faded bunch of violets at its feet, beheaded by a casual war-hammer. A house that burned, and shrieks from within.

Suddenly the aircraft overhead were not beautiful.

To reach up and pull them out of the sky!

Ruori stopped dead. The crew surged around him. He heard a short-haul chantey, deep young voices with the merriment of always having been free and well fed, but it echoed in a far corner of his brain.

"Casting off!" sang the mate.

"Not yet! Not yet! Wait!"

Ruori ran toward the poop, up the ladder and past the steersman to Doñita Tresa. She had risen again, to stand with bent head past which the hair swept to hide her face.

"Tresa," panted Ruori. "Tresa, I've an idea. I think—there may be

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a chance—perhaps we can fight back after all!"

She looked up. Her fingers closed on his arm till he felt the nails draw blood.

Words tumbled from him: "It will depend . . . on luring them . . . to us. At least a couple of their vessels . . . must follow us . . . to sea. I think then—I'm not sure of the details, but it may be . . . we can fight . . . even drive them off—"

Still she stared at him. He felt a hesitation. "Of course," he said, "we may lose the fight. And we do have the women aboard."

"If you lose," she asked, so low he could scarcely hear it, "will we die or be captured?"

"I think we will die."

"That is well." She nodded, shivering. "Yes. Fight, then."

"There is one thing I am unsure of. How to make them pursue us." He paused. "If someone were to let himself . . . be captured by them—and told them we were carrying off a great treasure—would they believe that?"

"They might well do so." Life had come back to her voice, even eagerness. "Let us say, the calde's hoard. None ever existed, but the robbers would believe my father's cellars were stuffed with gold."

"Then someone must go to them," said Ruori. He turned his back to her, twisted his fingers together and slogged toward a conclusion he did not want to reach. "But it could not be just anyone. They would club a man in among the other slaves, would they not? I mean, would they listen to him at all?"

"Probably not. Very few of them know Español. By the time a man who babbled of treasure was understood, they might all be halfway home." Tresa scowled. "What shall we do?"

Ruori saw the answer, but he could not get it past his throat.

"I am sorry," he mumbled. "My idea was not so good after all. Let us be gone."

The girl forced her way between him and the rail to stand in front of him, touching as if they danced again. Her voice was altogether steady. "You know a way."

"I do not!"

"I have come to know you well, in one night. You are a poor liar. Tell me."

He looked away. Somehow, he got out: "A woman—not any woman, but a very beautiful one—would she not soon be taken to their chief?"

Tresa stood aside. The color drained from her face.

"Yes," she said at last. "I think so."

"But then again," said Ruori wretchedly, "she might be killed. They do so much wanton killing, those men. I cannot let anyone who was given into my protection risk death."

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"You heathen fool," she said through tight lips, "do you think the chance of being killed matters to me?"

"What else could happen?" he asked, surprised. And then: "Oh, yes, of course, the woman would be a slave if we lost the battle afterward. Though I should imagine, if she is beautiful, she would not be badly treated."

"And is that all you—" Tresa stopped. He had never known it was possible for a smile to show pure hurt. "Of course. I should have realized. Your people have other ways of thinking."

"What do you mean?" he fumbled.

A moment more she stood with clenched fists. Then, half to herself: "They killed my father, yes, I saw him dead in the doorway. They would leave my city a ruin peopled by corpses."

Her head lifted. "I shall go," she said.

"You?" He grabbed her shoulders. "No, surely not you! One of the others—"

"Should I send anyone else? I am the calde's daughter."

She pulled herself free of him and hurried across the deck, down the ladder toward the gangway. Her face was turned from the ship. A few words drifted back: "Afterward, if there is an afterward, there is always the convent."

He did not understand. He stood on the poop, staring after her and abominating himself until she was lost to sight. Then he said, "Cast off," and the ship stood out to sea.

V

The Meycans fought doggedly, street by street and house by house, but after a couple of hours their surviving soldiers had all been driven into the northeast corner of S' Antón. They themselves hardly knew that, but a Sky chief had a view from above: one rover was now tethered to the cathedral, with a rope ladder for men to go up and down, and the other vessel, skeleton-crewed, brought their news to it.

"Good enough," said Loklann. "We'll keep them boxed in with a quarter of our force. I don't think they'll sally! Meanwhile the rest of us can get things organized; let's not give these creatures too much time to hide themselves and their silver. In the afternoon, when we're rested, we can land parachuters behind the city troops, drive them out into our lines and destroy them."

He ordered the *Buffalo* grounded, that he might load the most precious loot at once. The men, by and large, were too rough, good lads, but apt to damage a robe or a cup or a jeweled cross in their haste; and sometimes those Meycan things were

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too beautiful even to give away, let alone sell.

The flagship descended as much as possible. It still hung at a thousand feet, for hand pumps and aluminum-alloy tanks did not allow much hydrogen compression. In colder, denser air it would have been suspended even higher. But ropes snaked from it to a quickly assembled ground crew. At home there were ratcheted capstans outside every lodge, so that as little as four women could bring down a rover. One hated the emergency procedure of bleeding gas, for the Keepers could barely meet demand, in spite of a new sunpower unit added to their hydroelectric station, and charged accordingly. (Or so the Keepers said, but perhaps they were only taking advantage of being inviolable, beyond all kings, to jack up prices. Some chiefs, including Loklann, had begun to experiment with hydrogen production for themselves, but it was a slow thing to puzzle out an art that even the Keepers only half understood.)

Here, enough strong men replaced machinery. The *Buffalo* was soon pegged down in the cathedral plaza, which it almost filled. Loklann inspected each rope himself. His wounded leg ached, but not too much to walk on. More annoying was his right arm, which hurt worse from stitches than from the original cut. The medic had warned him to go easy with it. That meant fighting left-handed, for it should never be told that Loklann sunna Holber stayed out of combat. But he would only be half himself.

He touched the knife which had spiked him. At least he'd gotten a fine steel blade for his pains. And . . . hadn't the owner said they would meet again, to settle who kept it? There were omens in such words. It could be a pleasure to reincarnate that Ruori.

"Skipper. Skipper, sir."

Loklann glanced about. Yuw Red-Ax and Aalan sunna Rickar, men of his own lodge, had hailed him. They grasped the arms of a young woman in black velvet and silver. The beweaponed crowd, moiling about, was focusing itself on her; raw whoops lifted over the babble.

"What is it?" said Loklann brusquely. He had much to do.

"This wench, sir. A looker, isn't she? We picked her up down near the waterfront."

"Well, shove her into the temple with the rest till— Oh." Loklann rocked back on his heels, narrowing his eyes to meet a steady green glare. She was certainly a looker.

"She kept hollering the same words over and over. *Shef, rey, ombro gran*—I finally wondered if it didn't mean 'chief,'" said Yuw, "and then when she yelled *khan*

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I was pretty sure she wanted to see you. So we didn't use her at all ourselves," he finished virtuously.

"*Aba tu Español?*" said the girl.

Loklann grinned. "Yes," he replied in the same language, his words heavily accented but sufficient. "Well enough to know you are calling me 'thou.'" Her pleasantly formed mouth drew into a thin line. "Which means you think I am your inferior—or your god, or your beloved."

She flushed, threw back her head (sunlight ran along crow's-wing hair) and answered: "You might tell these oafs to release me."

Loklann said the order in Angliz. Yuw and Aalan let go. The marks of their fingers were bruised into her arms. Loklann stroked his beard. "Did you want to see me?" he asked.

"If you are the leader, yes," she said. "I am the calde's daughter, Doñita Tresa Carabán." Briefly, her voice wavered. "That is my father's chain of office you are wearing. I came on behalf of his people, to ask for terms."

"What?" Loklann blinked. Someone in the warrior crowd laughed.

It must not be in her to beg mercy, he thought; her tone remained brittle: "Considering your sure losses if you fight to a finish, and the chance of provoking a counterattack on your homeland, will you not accept a money ransom and a safe-conduct, releasing your captives and ceasing your destruction?"

"By Oktai," murmured Loklann. "Only a woman could imagine we—" He stopped. "Did you say you came back?"

She nodded. "On the people's behalf. I know I have no legal authority to make terms, but in practice—"

"Forget that!" he rapped. "Where did you come back from?"

She faltered. "That has nothing to do with—"

There were too many eyes around. Loklann bawled orders to start systematic plundering. Then he turned to the girl. "Come aboard the airship with me," he said. "I want to discuss this further."

Her eyes closed, for just a moment, and her lips moved. Then she looked at him, he thought of a cougar he had once trapped, and said in a flat voice: "Yes. I do have other arguments."

"Any woman does," he laughed, "but you more than most!"

"Not that!" she flared. "I meant— No. Marí, pray for me." As he pushed a way through his men, she followed him.

They went past furled sails, to a ladder let down from the gallery. A hatch stood open to the lower hull, showing storage space and leather fetters for slaves. A

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few guards were posted on the gallery deck. They leaned on their weapons, sweating from beneath helmets, swapping jokes; when Loklann led the girl by, they yelled good-humored envy.

He opened a door. "Have you ever seen one of our vessels?" he asked. The upper gondola contained a long room, bare except for bunk frames on which sleeping bags were laid. Then a series of partitions defined cabinets, a sort of galley, and at last, in the very bow, a room with maps, tables, navigation instruments, speaking tubes. Its walls slanted so far outward that the glazed windows would give a spacious view when the ship was aloft. On a shelf, beneath racked weapons, sat a small idol, tusked and four-armed. A pallet was rolled on the floor.

"The bridge," said Loklann. "Also the captain's cabin." He gestured at one of four wicker chairs, lashed into place. "Be seated, Doñita. Would you like something to drink?"

She sat down but did not reply. Her fists were clenched on her lap. Loklann poured himself a glass of whiskey and tossed off half at a gulp. "Ahhh! Later we will get some of your own wine for you. It is a shame you have no art of distilling here."

Desperate eyes lifted to him, where he stood over her. "S'ñor," she said, "I beg of you, in Carito's name—well, in your mother's then—spare my people."

"My mother would laugh herself ill to hear that," he said. Then, leaning forward: "See here, let us not spill words. You were escaping, but you came back. Where were you escaping to?"

"I— Does that matter?"

Good, he thought, she was starting to crack. He hammered: "It does. I know you were at the palace this dawn. I know you fled with the dark foreigners. I know their ship departed an hour ago. You must have been on it, but left again. Not so?"

"Yes." She began to tremble.

He sipped molten fire and asked reasonably: "Now tell me, Doñita, what you have to bargain with? You cannot have expected we would give up the best part of our booty and a great many valuable slaves, for a mere safe-conduct. All the Sky kingdoms would disown us. Come now, you must have more to offer, if you hope to buy us off."

"No . . . not really—"

His hand exploded against her cheek, so her head jerked from the blow. She huddled back, touching the red mark, as he growled: "I have no time for games. Tell me! Tell me this instant, what thought drove you back here from safety, or down in the hold you go. You'd fetch a good price when the traders next visit Canyon. There are

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many homes waiting for you: a woods runner's cabin in Oregon, a Mong khan's yurt in Tekkas, a brothel as far east as Chai Ka-Go. Tell me now, truly, what you know, and you will be spared that much."

She looked downward and said raggedly: "The foreign ship is loaded with the calde's gold. My father had long wanted to remove his personal treasure to a safer place than this, but dared not risk a wagon train across country. There are still many outlaws between here and Fortlez d' S' Ernán; so much loot would tempt the military escort itself to turn bandit. Captain Lohannaso agreed to carry the gold by sea to Port Wanawato, which is near Fortlez. He could be trusted because his government is anxious for trade with us, he came here officially. The treasure had already been loaded. Of course, when your raid came, the ship also took those women who had been at the palace. But can you not spare them? There is more loot in the foreign ship than your whole fleet can lift."

"By Oktail" whispered Loklann.

He turned from her, paced up and down, finally stopped and stared out the window. He could almost hear the gears turn in his head. It made sense! The palace had been disappointing . . . oh, yes, a lot of damask and silverware and whatnot, but nothing like the cathedral. Either the calde was less rich than powerful, or he concealed his hoard. Loklann had planned to torture a few servants and find out which. Now he realized there was a third possibility.

Better interrogate some prisoners anyway, to make sure— No, there wasn't time. Given a favoring wind, that ship could outrun any rover without working up a sweat. It might already be too late to overhaul. But if not— Hm. Assault would be no cinch. That lean, pitching hull was a small target for paratroops, and with so much rigging in the way. . . . No, wait, bold men could always find a road. How about grappling to the upper works? If the strain tore the rigging loose, so much the better: a weighted rope would then give a clear slideway to the deck. If the hooks held, though, a storming party could nevertheless go along the lines, into the topmasts. Doubtless the sailors were agile too, but had they ever reefed a rover sail in a Merikan thunderstorm, a mile above the earth?

He could improvise as the battle developed. At the very least, it would be fun to try! And at most, he might be reborn a world conqueror, for such an exploit in this life.

He laughed aloud, joyously. "We'll do it!"

Tresa rose. "You will spare the

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city?" she whispered hoarsely.

"I never promised any such thing," said Loklann blandly. "Of course, the ship's cargo will crowd out some of the stuff and people we might take otherwise. Unless, hm, unless we decide to sail the ship up to Calforni, loaded, and meet it there with more rovers. Yes, why not?"

"You oathbreaker," she said, with a hellful of scorn.

"I only promised not to sell you," said Loklann. His gaze went up and down her. "And I won't."

He took a stride forward and gathered her to him. She fought, cursing; once she managed to draw Ruori's knife from his belt, but his cuirass stopped the blade.

Finally he rose. She wept at his feet, her breast marked red by her father's chain. He said more quietly, "No, I will not sell you, Tresa. I will keep you."

VI

"Blimp ho-o-o-!"

The lookout's cry hung lonesome for a minute between wind and broad waters. Down under the mainmast, it seethed with crewmen running to their posts.

Ruori squinted eastward. The land was a streak under cumulus clouds mountainous and blue-shadowed. It took him a while to find the enemy, in all that sky. At last the sun struck them. He lifted his binoculars. Two painted killer whales lazed his way, slanting down from a mile altitude.

He sighed. "Only two," he said.

"That may be more than enough for us," said Atel Hamid. Sweat studded his forehead.

Ruori gave his mate a sharp look. "You're not afraid of them, are you? I daresay that's been one of their biggest assets, superstition."

"Oh, no, captain. I know the principle of buoyancy as well as you do. But those people up there are tough. And they're not trying to storm us from a dock this time; they're in their element."

"So are we." Ruori clapped the other man's back. "Take over. Tanaroa knows just what's going to happen, but use your own judgment if I'm spitted."

"I wish you'd let me go," protested Atel. "I don't like being safe down here. It's what can happen aloft that worries me."

"You won't be too safe for your own liking." Ruori forced a grin. "And somebody has to steer this tub home to hand in all those lovely reports to the Geoethnic Research Endeavor."

He swung down the ladder to the main deck and hurried to the mainmast shrouds. His crew yelled around him, weapons gleamed. The two big box kites quivered taut canvas, lashed to a bollard and waiting. Ruori wished there had been time to make more.

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Even as it was, though, he had delayed longer than seemed wise, first heading far out to sea and then tacking slowly back, to make the enemy search for him while he prepared. (Or planned, for that matter. When he dismissed Tresa, his own ideas had been little more than a conviction that he could fight.) Assuming they were lured after him at all, he had risked their losing patience and going back to the land. For an hour, now, he had dawdled under mainsail, genoa, and a couple of flying jibs, hoping the Sky People were lubbers enough not to find that suspiciously little canvas for such good weather.

But here they were, and there was an end to worry and remorse on a certain girl's behalf. Such emotions were rare in an Islander; and to find himself focusing them thus on a single person, out of all earth's millions, had been horrible. Ruori swarmed up the ratlines, as if he fled something.

The blimps were still high, passing overhead on an upper-level breeze. Down here was almost a straight south wind. The aircraft, unable to steer really close-hauled, would descend when they were sea-level upwind of him. Even so, estimated a cold part of Ruori's brain, the *Dolphin* could avoid their clumsy rush.

But the *Dolphin* wasn't going to.

The rigging was now dotted with armed sailors. Ruori pulled himself up on the mainmast crosstrees and sat down, casually swinging his legs. The ship heeled over in a flaw and he hung above greenish-blue, white-streaked immensity. He balanced, scarcely noticing, and asked Hiti: "Are you all set?"

"Aye." The big harpooner, his body one writhe of tattoos and muscles, nodded a shaven head. Lashed to the fid where he squatted was the ship's catapult, cocked and loaded with one of the huge irons that could kill a sperm whale at one blow. A couple more lay alongside in their rack. Hiti's two mates and four deckhands poised behind him, holding the smaller harpoons—mere six-foot shafts—that were launched from a boat by hand. The lines of all trailed down the mast to the bows.

"Aye, let 'em come now." Hiti grinned all over his round face. "Nan eat the world, but this'll be something to make a dance about when we come home!"

"If we do," said Ruori. He touched the small boat ax thrust into his loincloth. Like a curtain, the blinding day seemed to veil a picture from home, where combers broke white under the moon, longfires flared on a beach and dancers were merry and palm trees cast shadows for couples who stole away. He wondered how a Meycan calde's daughter

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might like it . . . if her throat had not been cut.

"There's a sadness on you, captain," said Hiti.

"Men are going to die," said Ruori.

"What of it?" Small kindly eyes studied him. "They'll die willing, if they must, for the sake of the song there'll be made. You've another trouble than mere death."

"Let me be!"

The harpooner looked hurt, but withdrew into silence. Wind streamed and the ocean glittered.

The aircraft steered close. There would be one on each side. Ruori unslung the megaphone at his shoulder. Atel Hamid held the *Dolphin* steady on a broad reach.

Now Ruori could see a grinning god at the prow of the starboard airship. It would pass just over the topmasts, a little to windward of the rail. . . . Arrows went impulsively toward it from the yardarms, without effect, but no one was excited enough to waste a rifle cartridge. Hiti swiveled his catapult. "Wait," said Ruori. "We'd better see what they do."

Helmeted heads appeared over the blimp's gallery rail. A man stepped up—another, another, at intervals—they whirled triple-clawed iron grapnels and let go. Ruori saw one strike the foremast, rebound, hit a jib . . . the line to the blimp tautened and sang but did not break, it was of leather . . . the jib ripped, canvas thundered, struck a sailor in the belly and knocked him from his yard . . . the man recovered enough to straighten out and hit the water in a clean dive, Lesu grant he lived . . . the grapnel bumped along, caught the gaff of the fore-and-aft mainsail, wood groaned . . . the ship trembled as line after line snapped tight.

She leaned far over, dragged by leverage. Her sails banged. No danger of capsizing—yet—but a mast could be pulled loose. And now, up over the gallery rail and seizing a rope between hands and knees, the pirates came. Whooping like boys, they slid down to the grapnels and clutched after any rigging that came to hand.

One of them sprang monkey-like onto the mainmast gaff, below the crosstrees. A harpooner's mate cursed, hurled his weapon, and skewered the invader. "Belay that!" roared Hiti. "We need those irons!"

Ruori scanned the situation. The leeward blimp was still maneuvering in around its mate, which was being blown to port. He put the megaphone to his mouth and a solar-battery amplifier cried for him: "Hear this! Hear this! Burn that second enemy now, before he grapples! Cut the lines to the first one and repel all boarders!"

"Shall I fire?" called Hiti. "I'll never have a better target."

"Aye."

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The harpooner triggered his catapult. It unwound with a thunder noise. Barbed steel smote the engaged gondola low in a side, tore through, and ended on the other side of interior planking.

"Wind 'er up!" bawled Hiti. His own gorilla hands were already on a crank lever. Somehow two other men found space to help him.

Ruori slipped down the futtock shrouds and jumped to the gaff. Another pirate had landed there and a third was just arriving, with two more aslide behind him. The man on the spar balanced barefooted, as good as any sailor, and drew a sword. Ruori dropped as the blade whistled, caught a mainsail grommet one-handed, and hung there, striking with his boat ax at the grapnel line. The pirate crouched and stabbed at him. Ruori thought of Tresa, smashed his hatchet into the man's face, and flipped him off, down to the deck. He cut again. The leather was tough, but his blade was keen. The line parted and whipped away. The gaff swung free, almost yanking Ruori's fingers loose. The second Sky Man toppled, hit a cabin below and spattered. The men on the line slid to its end. One of them could not stop, the sea took him. The other was smashed against the masthead as he pendulumed.

Ruori pulled himself back astride the gaff and sat there a while, heaving air into lungs that burned. The fight ramped around him, on shrouds and spars and down on the decks. The other blimp edged closer.

Astern, raised by the speed of a ship moving into the wind, a box kite lifted. Atel sang a command and the helmsman put the rudder over. Even with the drag on her, the *Dolphin* responded well; a profound science of fluid mechanics had gone into her design. Being soaked in whale oil, it clung there for a time — long enough for "messengers" of burning paper to whirl up its string. The kite burst into flame.

The blimp sheered off, the kite fell away, its small gunpowder load blew up harmlessly. Atel cursed and gave further orders. The *Dolphin* tacked. The second kite, already aloft and afire, hit target. It detonated.

Hydrogen gushed out. There was no explosion, but sudden flames wreathed the blimp. They seemed pale in the sun-dazzle. Smoke began to rise, as the plastic between gas cells disintegrated. The aircraft descended like a slow meteorite to the water.

Its companion vessel had no reasonable choice but to cast loose all unsevered grapnels, abandoning the still outnumbered boarding party. The captain could not know that the *Dolphin* had only possessed two kites. A few

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vengeful catapult bolts spat from it. Then it was free, rapidly falling astern. The Maurai ship rocked toward an even keel.

The enemy might retreat or he might plan some fresh attack. Ruori did not intend that it should be either. He megaphoned: "Put about! Face that scum-gut!" And led a rush down the shrouds to a deck where combat still went on.

For Hiti's gang had put three primary harpoons and half a dozen lesser ones into the gondola.

Their lines trailed in tightening catenaries from the blimp to the capstan in the bows. No fear now of undue strain. The *Dolphin,* like any Maurai craft, was meant to live off the sea as she traveled. She had dragged more than one right whale alongside; a blimp was nothing in comparison. What counted was speed, before the pirates realized what was happening and found ways to cut loose.

"*Tohiha, hioha, itoki, itoki!*" The old canoe chant rang forth as men tramped about the capstan. Ruori hit the deck, saw a Canyon man fighting a sailor, sword against club, and brained the fellow from behind as he would any other vermin. (Then wondered, dimly shocked, what made him think thus about a human being.) The battle was rapidly concluded, the Sky Men faced hopeless odds. But half a dozen Federation people were badly hurt. Ruori had the few surviving pirates tossed into a lazaret, his own casualties taken below to anesthetics and antibiotics and cooing Doñitas. Then, quickly, he prepared his crew for the next phase.

The blimp had been drawn almost to the bowsprit. It was canted over so far that its catapults were useless. Pirates lined the gallery deck, howled and shook their weapons. They outnumbered the *Dolphin* crew by a factor of three or four. Ruori recognized one among them — the tall yellow-haired man who had fought him outside the palace— it was a somehow eerie feeling.

"Shall we burn them?" asked Atel.

Ruori grimaced. "I suppose we have to," he said. "Try not to ignite the vessel itself. You know we want it."

A walking beam moved up and down, driven by husky Islanders. Flame spurted from a ceramic nozzle. The smoke and stench and screams that followed, and the things to be seen when Ruori ordered cease fire, made even the hardest veteran of corsair patrol look a bit ill. The Maurai were an unsentimental folk, but they did not like to inflict pain.

"Hose," rasped Ruori. The streams of water that followed were like some kind of blessing. Wicker that had begun to burn hissed into charred quiescence.

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The ship's own grapnels were flung. A couple of cabin boys darted past grown men to be first along the lines. They met no resistance on the gallery. The uninjured majority of pirates stood in a numb fashion, their armament at their feet, the fight kicked out of them. Jacob's ladders followed the boys; the *Dolphin* crew swarmed aboard the blimp and started rounding up prisoners.

A few Sky Men lurched from behind a door, weapons aloft. Ruori saw the tall fair man among them. The man drew Ruori's dagger, left-handed, and ran toward him. His right arm seemed nearly useless. "A Canyon, a Canyon!" he called, the ghost of a war cry.

Ruori sidestepped the charge and put out a foot. The blond man tripped. As he fell, the hammer of Ruori's ax clopped down, catching him on the neck. He crashed, tried to rise, shuddered, and lay twitching.

"I want my knife back." Ruori squatted, undid the pirate's tooled leather belt, and began to hogtie him.

Dazed blue eyes looked up with a sort of pleading. "Are you not going to kill me?" mumbled the other in Español.

"Haristi, no," said Ruori, surprised. "Why should I?"

He sprang up. The last resistance had ended, the blimp was his. He opened the forward door, thinking the equivalent of a ship's bridge must lie beyond it.

Then for a while he did not move at all, nor did he hear anything but the wind and his own blood.

It was Tresa who finally came to him. Her hands were held out before her, like a blind person's, and her eyes looked through him. "You are here," she said, flat and empty.

"Doñita," stammered Ruori. He caught her hands. "Doñita, had I known you were aboard, I would never have . . . have risked—"

"Why did you not burn and sink us, like that other vessel?" she asked in a flayed voice. "Why must this one return to the city?"

She wrenched free of him and stumbled out onto the deck. It was steeply tilted, and it bucked beneath her. She fell, picked herself up, walked with barefoot care to the rail and stared out across the ocean. Her hair and torn dress fluttered in the wind.

VII

There was a great deal of technique to handling an airship. Ruori could feel that the thirty men he had put aboard this one were sailing it as awkwardly as possible. An experienced Sky Man would know what sort of thermals and downdrafts to expect, just from a glance at land or water below; he could estimate the level at which a desired breeze was

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blowing, and rise or fall smoothly; he could even beat to windward, though it would be a slow process much plagued by drift.

Nevertheless, an hour's study showed the basic principles. Ruori went back to the bridge and gave orders in the speaking tube. Presently the land came nearer. A glance below showed the *Dolphin*, with a cargo of war captives, following on shortened sail. He and his fellow aeronauts would have to take a lot of banter about their celestial snail's pace. Ruori did not smile at the thought or plan his replies, as he would have done even yesterday. Tresa sat so still behind him.

"Do you know the name of this craft, Doñita?" he asked, to break the silence.

"He called it *Buffalo*," she said, remote and uninterested.

"What's that?"

"A sort of wild cattle."

"I gather, then, that he talked to you while cruising in search of me. Did he say anything else of interest?"

"He spoke of his people. He boasted of all the things they have which we don't . . . engines, powers, alloys . . . as if that made them any less a pack of filthy savages."

At least she was showing some spirit. He had been afraid she had started willing her heart to stop; but he remembered he had seen no evidence of that common Maurai practice here in Meyco.

"Did he abuse you so badly, then?" he asked, not looking at her.

"You would not consider it abuse," she said violently. "Now leave me alone, for mercy's sake!" He heard her go from him, through the door to the after sections.

Well, he thought, after all, her father was killed. That would grieve anyone, anywhere in the world, but her perhaps more than him. For a Meycan child was raised solely by its parents; it did not spend half its time eating or sleeping or playing with any casual relative, like most Island young. So the immediate kin would have more psychological significance here. At least, it was the only explanation Ruori could think of for the sudden darkness within Tresa.

The city hove into view. He saw the remaining enemy vessels gleam above it. Three against one . . . yes, this would become a legend among the Sea People, if it succeeded. Ruori knew he should have felt the same reckless pleasure as a man did surf-bathing, or shark fighting, or sailing in a typhoon, any break-neck sport where success meant glory and girls. He could hear his men chant outside, beat war-drum rhythms out with hands and stamping feet. But his own heart was Antarctic.

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The nearest hostile craft approached. Ruori tried to meet it in a professional way. He had attired his prize crew in captured Sky outfits. A superficial glance would take them for legitimate Canyonites, depleted after a hard fight but with the captured Maurai ship at their heels.

As the northerners steered close in the leisurely airship fashion, Ruori picked up his speaking tube. "Steady as she goes. Fire when we pass abeam."

"Aye, aye," said Hiti.

A minute later the captain heard the harpoon catapult rumble. Through a port he saw the missile strike the other gondola amidships. "Pay out line," he said. "We want to hold her for the kite, but not get burned ourselves."

"Aye, I've played swordfish before now." Laughter bubbled in Hiti's tones.

The foe sheered, frantic. A few bolts leaped from its catapults; one struck home, but a single punctured gas cell made small difference. "Put about!" cried Ruori. No sense in presenting his beam to a broadside. Both craft began to drift downwind, sails flapping. "Hard a-lee!" The *Buffalo* became a drogue, holding its victim to a crawl. And here came the kite prepared on the way back. This time it included fish hooks. It caught and held fairly on the Canyonite bag. "Cast off!" yelled Ruori. Fire whirled up the kite string. In minutes it had enveloped the enemy. A few parachutes were blown out to sea.

"Two to go," said Ruori, without any of his men's shouted triumph.

The invaders were no fools. Their other blimps turned back over the city, not wishing to expose themselves to more flame from the water. One descended, threw out hawsers, and was rapidly hauled to the plaza. Through his binoculars, Ruori saw armed men swarm aboard it. The other, doubtless with a mere patrol crew, maneuvered toward the approaching *Buffalo.*

"I think that fellow wants to engage us," warned Hiti. "Meanwhile Number Two down there will take on a couple of hundred soldiers, then lay alongside us and board."

"I know," said Ruori. "Let's oblige them."

He steered as if to close with the sparsely manned patroller. It did not avoid him, as he had feared it might; but then, there was a compulsive bravery in the Sky culture. Instead, it maneuvered to grapple as quickly as possible. That would give its companion a chance to load warriors and rise— It came very near.

Now to throw a scare in them, Ruori decided. "Fire arrows," he said. Out on deck, hardwood pistons were shoved into little

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cylinders, igniting tinder at the bottom; thus oil-soaked shafts were kindled. As the enemy came in range, red comets began to streak from the *Buffalo* archers.

Had his scheme not worked, Ruori would have turned off. He didn't want to sacrifice more men in hand-to-hand fighting; instead, he would have tried seriously to burn the other airship from afar, though his strategy needed it. But the morale effect of the previous disaster was very much present. As blazing arrows thunked into their gondola, a battle tactic so two-edged that no northern crew was even equipped for it, the Canyonites panicked and went over the side. Perhaps, as they parachuted down, a few noticed that no shafts had been aimed at their gas bag.

"Grab fast!" sang Ruori. "Douse any fires!"

Grapnels thumped home. The blimps rocked to a relative halt. Men leaped to the other gallery; bucketsful of water splashed.

"Stand by," said Ruori. "Half our boys on the prize. Break out the lifelines and make them fast."

He put down the tube. A door squeaked behind him. He turned, as Tresa re-entered the bridge. She was still pale, but she had somehow combed her hair, and her head was high.

"Another!" she said with a note near joy. "Only one of them left!"

"But it will be full of their men." Ruori scowled. "I wish now I had not accepted your refusal to go aboard the *Dolphin.* I wasn't thinking clearly. This is too hazardous."

"Do you think I care for that?" she said. "I am a Carabán."

"But I care," he said.

The haughtiness dropped from her; she touched his hand, fleetingly, and color rose in her cheeks. "Forgive me. You have done so much for us. There is no way we can ever thank you."

"Yes, there is," said Ruori.

"Name it."

"Do not stop your heart just because it has been wounded."

She looked at him with a kind of sunrise in her eyes.

His boatswain appeared at the outer door. "All set, captain. We're holding steady at a thousand feet, with a man standing by every valve these two crates have got."

"Each has been assigned a particular escape line?"

"Aye." The boatswain departed.

"You'll need one too. Come." Ruori took Tresa by the hand and led her onto the gallery. They saw sky around them, a breeze touched their faces and the deck underfoot moved like a live thing. He indicated one of many light cords from the *Dolphin's* store, bowlined to the rail. "We aren't going to risk parachuting with untrained men," he said. "But you've no experience in skin-

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ning down one of these. I'll make you a harness which will hold you safely. Ease yourself down hand over hand. When you reach the ground, cut loose." His knife slashed some pieces of rope and he knotted them together with a seaman's skill. When he fitted the harness on her, she grew tense under his fingers.

"But I am your friend," he murmured.

She eased. She even smiled, shakenly. He gave her his knife and went back inboard.

And now the last pirate vessel stood up from the earth. It moved near; Ruori's two craft made no attempt to flee. He saw sunlight flash on edged metal. He knew they had witnessed the end of their companion craft and would not be daunted by the same technique; rather, they would close in, even with their ship burning about them—if nothing else, they could kindle him in turn and then parachute to safety. He did not send arrows.

When only a few fathoms separated him from the enemy, he cried: "Let go the valves!"

Gas whoofed from both bags. The linked blimps dropped. "Fire!" shouted Ruori. Hiti aimed his catapult up and sent a harpoon with anchor cable through the bottom of the attacker. "Burn and abandon!"

Men on deck touched off oil which other men splashed from jars. Flames sprang up.

With the weight of two nearly deflated vessels dragging it from below, the Canyon ship began to fall. At five hundred feet the tossed lifelines draped across flat rooftops and trailed in the streets. Ruori went over the side. He scorched his palms going down.

He was not much too quick. The harpooned blimp ordered compressed hydrogen released; the vessel rose to a thousand feet with its burden, seeking sky room. Presumably no one had yet seen that the burden was on fire. In no case would they find it easy to shake or cut loose from one of Hiti's irons.

Ruori stared upward. Fanned by the wind, the flames were smokeless, a small fierce sun. He had not counted on his fire taking the enemy by total surprise. He had assumed they would parachute to earth, where the Meycans could attack. Almost, he wanted to warn them.

Then flame reached the remaining hydrogen in the collapsed gas bags. There was a sort of giant gasp. The topmost vessel became a flying pyre. The wind bore it out over the city walls. A few antlike figures managed to spring free. The parachute of one was burning.

"Sant'sima Marí," whispered a voice, and Tresa crept into Ruori's arms and hid her face.

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VIII

After dark, candles were lit throughout the palace. They could not blank the ugliness of stripped walls and smoke-blackened ceilings. The guardsmen who lined the throne room were tattered and weary. Nor did S' Antón itself rejoice, yet. There were too many dead.

Ruori sat throned on the calde's dais, Tresa at his right and Páwolo Dónoju on his left. Until a new set of officials could be chosen, these must take authority. The Don sat rigid, not allowing his bandaged head to droop, but now and then his lids grew too heavy to hold up. Tresa watched enormous-eyed from beneath the hood of a cloak wrapping her. Ruori sprawled at ease; he felt a little more happy now that the fighting was over.

It had been a grim business, even after the heartened city troops had sallied and driven the surviving enemy before them. Too many Sky Men fought till they were killed. The hundreds of prisoners, mostly from the first Maurai success, would prove a dangerous booty; no one was sure what to do with them.

"But at least their host is done for," said Dónoju.

Ruori shook his head. "No, S'ñor. I am sorry, but there is no end in sight. Up north are thousands of such aircraft, and a strong hungry people. They will come again."

"We will meet them, captain. The next time we shall be prepared. A larger garrison, barrage balloons, fire kites, cannons that shoot upward, even a flying navy of our own . . . we can learn what to do."

Tresa stirred. There was life again in her words, but a life which hated: "In the end, we will carry the war to them. There will not be one left in all the Corado highlands."

"No," said Ruori. "That must not be."

Her head jerked about, she stared at him from the shadow of her hood. Finally she said, "True, we are bidden to love our enemies, but you cannot mean the Sky People. They are not human!"

Ruori spoke to a page: "Send for the chief prisoner."

"To hear our judgment on him?" asked Dónoju. "But that should be done formally, in public."

"Only to talk with us," said Ruori.

"I do not understand you," said Tresa. Her tones faltered, unable to carry the intended scorn, but the phrases came out: "After all you have done, suddenly there is no manhood in you."

He wondered why it should hurt for her to say that. He would not have cared if she had been anyone else.

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Loklann entered between two guards. His hands were bound behind him and dried blood was on his face, but he walked like a conqueror under the pikes. When he reached the dais, he stood with feet braced apart and grinned up at Tresa.

"Well," he said, "so you find these others less satisfactory and want me back."

She jumped to her feet and screamed: "Kill him!"

"No!" cried Ruori.

The guardsmen hesitated, their machetes half drawn. Ruori stood up and caught the girl's wrists. She struggled, spitting like a cat. "Don't kill him, then," she agreed at last, so thickly it was hard to understand. "Not now. Make it slow. Strangle him, burn him alive, toss him on your spears—"

Ruori held fast till she stood quietly.

When he let go, she sat down and wept.

Páwolo Dónoju said in a voice like steel: "I believe I understand. A fit punishment must certainly be devised."

Loklann spat on the floor. "Of course," he said. "When you have a man tied up there are any number of dirty little games to play with him."

"Be still," said Ruori. "You are not helping your own cause. Or mine."

He sat down, crossed his legs and laced fingers around one knee and gazed before him, into the darkness at the hall's end. "I know you have all suffered from this man's work," he said, slowly and with care. "You can expect to suffer more from his kinfolk in the future. They are a young race, heedless as children, even as your ancestors and mine were once young. Do you think the Perio was established without hurt and harm? Or, if I remember your history rightly, that the Español people were welcomed here by the Inios? That the Ingliss did not come to N'Zealann with slaughter, and that the Maurai were not once cannibals? In an age of heroes, the hero must have an opponent.

"Your real weapon against the Sky People is not an army, sent up to lose itself in unmapped mountains. . . . Your priests, merchants, arists, craftsmen, manners, fashions, learning – there is the means to bring them to you on their knees, if you will use it!"

Loklann started. "You devil," he whispered. "Do you actually think to convert us to . . . a woman's faith and a city's cage?" He shook back his tawny mane and roared so the walls rang. "No!"

"It will take a century or two," said Ruori.

Don Páwolo smiled in his young scanty beard. "A refined revenge, S'ñor captain," he admitted.

"Too refined!" Tresa lifted her

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face from her hands, gulped after air, held up claw-crooked fingers and brought them down as if into Loklann's eyes. "Even if it could be done," she snarled, "even if they did have souls, what do we want with them, or their children or grandchildren . . . they who murdered our babies today? Before almighty Dío—I am the last Carabán and I will have my following to speak for me in Meyco's government — there will never be anything for them but extermination! We can do it, I swear. There would be Tekkans who would help, for plunder. I shall yet live to see your home burning, you swine, and your sons hunted with dogs!"

She turned frantically toward Ruori. "How else can our land be safe? We are ringed in with enemies. We have no choice but to destroy them, or they will destroy us. And we are the last Merikan civilization!"

She sat back and shuddered. Ruori reached over to take her hand. It felt cold. For a bare instant, unconsciously, she returned the pressure, then jerked away.

He sighed in his weariness.

"I must disagree," he said. "I am sorry. I understand how you feel."

"You do not," she said through clamped jaws. "You cannot."

"But after all," he said, forcing dryness, "I am not just a man with human desires. I represent my government. I must return to tell them what is here, and I can predict their response.

"They will help you stand off attack. That is not an aid you can refuse, is it? The men who will be responsible for all Meyco are not going to decline our offer of alliance merely to preserve a precarious independence of action, whatever a few extremists may argue for. And our terms will be most reasonable. We will want little more from you than a policy working toward conciliation and close relations with the Sky People, as soon as they have tired of battering themselves against our united defense."

"What?" said Loklann. Otherwise it was very still. Eyes gleamed white from the shadows of helmets, toward Ruori.

"We will begin with you," said the Maurai. "At the proper time, you and your fellows will be escorted home. Your ransom will be that your nation allow a diplomatic and trade mission to enter."

"No," said Tresa, as if it hurt her throat. "Not him. Send back all the others if you must, but not him—to boast of what he did today."

Loklann grinned again, looking straight at her. "I will," he said.

Anger flickered in Ruori, but he held his mouth shut.

"I do not understand," hesitated Don Páwolo. "*Why* do you favor these animals?"

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"Because they are more civilized than you," said Ruori.

"What?" The noble sprang to his feet, snatching for his sword. Then, stiffly, he sat down again. His tone froze over. "Explain yourself, S'ñor."

Ruori could not see Tresa's face, in the private night of her hood, but he felt her drawing farther from him than a star. "They have developed aircraft," he said, slumping back in his chair, worn out and with no sense of victory. O great creating Tanaroa, grant me sleep this night!

"But—"

"It has been done from the ground up," explained Ruori, "not as a mere copy of ancient techniques. Beginning as refugees, the Sky People created an agriculture which can send warriors by the thousands from what was once desert, yet plainly does not require peon hordes. On interrogation I have learned that they have sunpower and hydroelectric power, a synthetic chemistry of sorts, a well-developed navigation with all the mathematics which that implies, gunpowder, metallurgics, aerodynamics. . . . Oh, I daresay it's a lopsided culture, a thin layer of learning above a largely illiterate mass. But even the mass must respect technology, or it would never have been supported to get as far as it has.

"In short," he sighed, wondering if he could make her understand, "the Sky People are a scientific race — the only one besides ourselves which we Maurai have yet discovered. And that makes them too precious to lose.

"You have better manners here, more humane laws, higher art, broader vision, all the traditional virtues. But you are not scientific. You use rote knowledge handed down from the ancients. Because there is no more fossil fuel, you depend on muscle power; inevitably, then, there is a peon class, and always will be. Because the iron and copper mines are exhausted, you tear down old ruins. In your land I have seen no research on wind power, sun power, the energy reserves of the living cell—not to mention the theoretical possibility of hydrogen fusion without a uranium primer. You irrigate the desert at a thousand times the effort it would take to farm the sea, yet have never even tried to improve your fishing techniques. You have not exploited the aluminum which is still abundant in ordinary clays, not sought to make it into strong alloys; no, your farmers use tools of wood and volcanic glass!

"Oh, you are neither ignorant nor superstitious. What you lack is merely the means of gaining new knowledge. You are a fine people, the world is the sweeter for you, I love you as much as I loathe this devil before us. But ultimately, my friends, if left to

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yourselves, you will slide gracefully back into the Stone Age."

A measure of strength returned. He raised his voice till it filled the hall: "The way of the Sky People is the rough way outward, to the stars. In that respect—and it overrides all others—they are more akin to us Maurai than you are. We cannot let our kin die."

He sat then, in silence, under Loklann's smirk and Dónoju's stare. A guardsman shifted on his feet, with a faint squeak of leather harness.

Tresa said at last, very low in the shadows: "That is your final word, S'ñor?"

"Yes," said Ruori. He turned to her. As she leaned forward, the hood fell back a little, so that candlelight touched her. And the sight of green eyes and parted lips gave him back his victory.

He smiled. "I do not expect you will understand at once. May I discuss it with you again, often? When you have seen the Islands, as I hope you will—"

"You *foreigner*!" she screamed.

Her hand cracked on his cheek. She rose and ran down the dais steps and out of the hall.

Ruori did not put his hand up to his face. He followed Tresa with his eyes, even for a little while after she was gone. Then he turned back with an effort to Donoju and said, "I am sorry if I offend you. . . . Many things," he whispered, so that Donoju leaned forward, with instinctive courtesy, to hear him, "are more important than . . . feelings."

He stood up. "You must excuse me. We are all very tired, I think, and I would like to sleep aboard my ship tonight."

Detection can be fun

On Labor Day weekend—Friday evening, Sept. 4th through Monday, Sept. 7th—the 17th World Science Fiction Convention in Detroit, (known hereafter as the Detention) convenes at the Pick-Fort Shelby Hotel.

A program designed to entertain, many exhibits, the presence of top name authors, editors, publishers, and fans, and hundreds of friendly people . . . these are only part of what you'll find at *Detention!*

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One of the many curious aspects of the communications industry—associated principally with New York's Madison Avenue—is the difficulty in communicating with it. *"The Devil take it!" many a man has said. But would that, Mr. Bester asks, help?*

WILL YOU WAIT?

by Alfred Bester

THEY KEEP WRITING THOSE ANTIquated stories about bargains with the Devil. You know . . . sulphur, spells and pentagrams; tricks, snares and delusions. They don't know what they're talking about. Twentieth Century diabolism is slick and streamlined, like jukeboxes and automatic elevators and television and all the other modern efficiencies that leave you helpless and infuriated.

A year ago I got fired from an agency job for the third time in ten months. I had to face the fact that I was a failure. I was also dead broke. I decided to sell my soul to the Devil, but the problem was how to find him. I went down to the main reference room of the library and read everything on demonology and devil-lore. Like I said, it was all just talk. Anyway, if I could have afforded the expensive ingredients which they claimed could raise the Devil, I wouldn't have had to deal with him in the first place.

I was stumped, so I did the obvious thing; I called Celebrity Service. A delicate young man answered.

I asked, "Can you tell me where the Devil is?"

"Are you a subscriber to Celebrity Service?"

"No."

"Then I can give you no information."

"I can afford to pay a small fee for one item."

"You wish limited service?"

"Yes."

"Who is the celebrity, please?"

"The Devil."

"Who?"

"The Devil . . . Satan, Lucifer, Scratch, Old Nick . . . The Devil."

"One moment, please." In five minutes he was back, extremely annoyed. "Veddy soddy. The Devil is no longer a celebrity."

He hung up. I did the sensible thing and looked through the tele-

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phone directory. On a page decorated with ads for Sardi's Restaurant I found Satan, Shaitan, Carnage & Bael, 477 Madison Avenue, Judson 3-1900. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

"SSC&B. Good morning."

"May I speak to Mr. Satan, please?"

"The lines are busy. Will you wait?"

I waited and lost my dime. I wrangled with the operator and lost another dime but got the promise of a refund in postage stamps. I called Satan, Shaitan, Carnage & Bael again.

"SSC&B. Good morning."

"May I speak to Mr. Satan? And please don't leave me hanging on the phone. I'm calling from a—"

The switchboard cut me off and buzzed. I waited. The coin-box gave a warning click. At last a line opened.

"Miss Hogan's office."

"May I speak to Mr. Satan?"

"Who's calling?"

"He doesn't know me. It's a personal matter."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Satan is no longer with our organization."

"Can you tell me where I can find him?"

There was muffled discussion in broad Brooklyn and then Miss Hogan spoke in crisp Secretary: "Mr. Satan is now with Beëlzebub, Belial, Devil & Orgy."

I looked them up in the phone directory. 383 Madison Avenue, Plaza 6-1900. I dialed. The phone rang once and then choked. A metallic voice spoke in sing-song: "The number you are dialing is not a working number. Kindly consult your directory for the correct number. This a recorded message." I consulted my directory. It said Plaza 6-1900. I dialed again and got the same recorded message.

I finally broke through to a live operator who was persuaded to give me the new number of Beëlzebub, Belial, Devil & Orgy. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

"B.B.D.O. Good morning."

"May I speak to Mr. Satan, please?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Satan."

"I'm sorry. There is no such person with our organization."

"Then give me Beëlzebub or the Devil."

"One moment, please."

I waited. Every half minute she opened my wire long enough to gasp: "Still ringing the Dev—" and then cut off before I had a chance to answer. At last a bright young woman spoke. "Mr. Devil's office."

"May I speak to him?"

"Who's calling?"

I gave her my name.

"He's on another line, Will you wait?"

I waited. I was fortified with a dwindling reserve of nickels and

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dimes. After twenty minutes, the bright young woman spoke again: "He's just gone into an emergency meeting. Can he call you back?"

"No. I'll try again."

Nine days later I finally got him.

"Yes, sir? What can I do for you?"

I took a breath. "I want to sell you my soul."

"Have you got anything on paper?"

"What do you mean, anything on paper?"

"The Property, my boy. The Sell. You can't expect B.B.D.O. to buy a pig in a poke. We may drink out of dixie cups up here, but the sauce has got to be a hundred proof. Bring in your Presentation. My girl'll set up an appointment."

I prepared a Presentation of my soul with plenty of Sell. Then I called his girl.

"I'm sorry, he's on the Coast. Call back in two weeks."

Five weeks later she gave me an appointment. I went up and sat in the photo-montage reception room of B.B.D.O. for two hours, balancing my Sell on my knees. Finally I was ushered into a corner office decorated with Texas brands in glowing neon. The Devil was lounging on his contour chair, dictating to an Iron Maiden. He was a tall man with the phoney voice of a sales manager; the kind that talks loud in elevators. He gave me a Sincere handshake and immediately looked through my Presentation.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all. I think we can do business. No what did you have in mind? The usual?"

"Money, success, happiness."

He nodded. "The usual. Now we're square shooters in this shop. B.B.D.O. doesn't dry-gulch. We'll guarantee money, success and happiness."

"For how long?"

"Normal life-span. No tricks, my boy. We take our estimates from the Actuary Tables. Offhand I'd say you're good for another forty, forty-five years. We can pin-point that in the contract later."

"No tricks?"

He gestured impatiently. "That's all bad public relations, what you're thinking. I promise you, no tricks."

"Guaranteed?"

"Not only do we guarantee service; we *insist* on giving service. B.B.D.O. doesn't want any beefs going up to the Fair Practice Committee. You'll have to call on us for service at least twice a year or the contract will be terminated."

"What kind of service?"

He shrugged. "Any kind. Shine your shoes; empty ashtrays; bring you dancing girls. That can be pin-pointed later. We just insist that you use us at least twice a

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year. We've got to give you a quid for your quo. *Quid pro quo.* Check?"

"But no tricks?"

"No tricks. I'll have our legal department draw up the contract. Who's representing you?"

"You mean an agent? I haven't got one."

He was startled. "Haven't got an agent? My boy, you're living dangerously. Why, we could skin you alive. Get yourself an agent and tell him to call me."

"Yes, sir. M-May I . . . Could I ask a question?"

"Shoot. Everything is open and above-board at B.B.D.O."

"What will it be like for me . . . wh-when the contract terminates?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"I don't advise it."

"I want to know."

He showed me. It was like a hideous session with a psychoanalyst, in perpetuity . . . an eternal, agonizing self-indictment. It was hell. I was shaken.

"I'd rather have inhuman fiends torturing me," I said.

He laughed. "They can't compare to man's inhumanity to himself. Well . . . changed your mind, or is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

We shook hands and he ushered me out. "Don't forget," he warned. "Protect yourself. Get an agent. Get the best."

I signed with Sibyl & Sphinx. That was on March 3rd. I called S&S on March 15th. Mrs. Sphinx said: "Oh yes, there's been a hitch. Miss Sibyl was negotiating with B.B.D.O. for you, but she had to fly to Sheol. I've taken over for her."

I called April 1st. Miss Sibyl said: "Oh yes, there's been a slight delay. Mrs. Sphinx had to go to Salem for a try-out. A witch-burning. She'll be back next week."

I called April 15th. Miss Sibyl's bright young secretary told me that there was some delay getting the contracts typed. It seemed that B.B.D.O. was re-organizing its legal department. On May 1st Sibyl & Sphinx told me that the contracts had arrived and that *their* legal department was looking them over.

I had to take a menial job in June to keep body and soul together. I worked in the stencil department of a network. At least once a week a script would come in about a bargain with the Devil which was signed, sealed and delivered before the opening commercial. I used to laugh at them. After four months of negotiation I was still threadbare.

I saw the Devil once, bustling down Park Avenue. He was running for Congress and was very busy being jolly and hearty with the electorate. He addressed every cop and doorman by first name. When I spoke to him he got a

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little frightened; thinking I was a Communist or worse. He didn't remember me at all.

In July, all negotiations stopped; everybody was away on vacation. In August everybody was overseas for some Black Mass Festival. In September Sibyl & Sphinx called me to their office to sign the contract. It was thirty-seven pages long, and fluttered with pasted-in corrections and additions. There were half a dozen tiny boxes stamped on the margin of every page.

"If you only knew the work that went into this contract," Sibyl & Sphinx told me with satisfaction.

"It's kind of long, isn't it?"

"It's the short contracts that make all the trouble. Initial every box, and sign on the last page. All six copies."

I initialled and signed. When I was finished I didn't feel and different. I'd expected to start tingling with money, success and happiness.

"Is it a deal now?" I asked.

"Not until *he's* signed it."

"I can't hold out much longer."

"We'll send it over by messenger."

I waited a week and then called.

"You forgot to initial one of the boxes," they told me.

I went to the office and initialed. After another week I called.

"*He* forgot to initial one of the boxes," they told me that time.

On October 1st I received a special delivery parcel. I also received a registered letter. The parcel contained the signed, sealed and delivered contract between me and the Devil. I could at last be rich, successful and happy. The registered letter was from B.B.D.O. and informed me that in view of my failure to comply with Clause 27-A of the contract, it was considered terminated, and I was due for collection at their convenience. I rushed down to Sibyl & Sphinx.

"What's Clause 27-A?" they asked.

We looked it up. It was the clause that required me to use the services of the Devil at least once every six months.

"What's the date of the contract?" Sibyl & Sphinx asked.

We looked it up. The contract was dated March 1st, the day I'd had my first talk with the Devil in his office.

"March, April, May . . ." Miss Sibyl counted on her fingers. "That's right. Seven months have elapsed. Are you sure you didn't ask for *any* service?"

"How could I? I didn't have a contract."

"We'll see about this," Mrs. Sphinx said grimly. She called B.B.D.O. and had a spirited argument with the Devil and his legal department. Then she hung up. "He says you shook hands on the

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deal March 1st," she reported. "He was prepared in good faith to go ahead with his side of the bargain."

"How could I know? I didn't have a contract."

"Didn't you ask for anything?"

"No. I was waiting for the contract."

Sibyl & Sphinx called in their legal department and presented the case.

"You'll have to arbitrate," the legal department said, and explained that agents are forbidden to act as their client's attorney.

I hired the legal firm of Wizard, Warlock, Voodoo, Dowser & Hag (99 Wall Street, Exchange 3-1900) to represent me before the Arbitration Board (479 Madison Avenue, Lexington 5-1900). They asked for a $200 retainer plus twenty percent of the contract's benefits. I'd managed to save $34 during the four months I was working in the stencil department. They waived the retainer and went ahead with the Arbitration preliminaries.

On November 15th the network demoted me to the mail room, and I seriously contemplated suicide. Only the fact that my soul was in jeopardy in an arbitration stopped me.

The case came up December 12th. It was tried before a panel of three impartial Arbitrators and took all day. I was told they'd mail me their decision. I waited a week and called Wizard, Warlock, Voodoo, Dowser & Hag.

"They've recessed for the Christmas holidays," they told me.

I called January 2nd.

"One of them's out of town."

I called January 10th.

"He's back, but the other two are out of town."

"When will I get a decision?"

"It could take months."

"How do you think my chances look?"

"Well, we've never lost an arbitration."

"That sounds pretty good."

"But there can always be a first time."

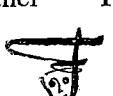
That sounded pretty bad. I got scared and figured I'd better copper my bets. I did the sensible thing and hunted through the telephone directory until I found Seraphim, Cherubim and Angel, 666 Fifth Avenue, Templeton 6-1900. I called them. A bright young woman answered.

"Seraphim, Cherubim and Angel. Good morning."

"May I speak to Mr. Angel, please?"

"He's on another line. Will you wait?"

I'm still waiting.



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CLIFTON FADIMAN, writer and editor, judge of the Book-of-the-Month Club, writes: *"Each of us has his own special escape-reading. Mine is science fiction. To my mind Fantasy and Science Fiction regularly supplies the finest the field has to offer in the way of short fiction."*

SPRING BYINGTON, famous star of the Broadway stage and motion pictures, now starring in the CBS TV show "December Bride," writes: *"If your imagination is sedentary, getting stiff, inelastic, arthritic, it needs exercise. For this I prescribe one issue a month of Fantasy and Science Fiction. Improvement will be noted after the first dose."*

BASIL DAVENPORT, writer and editor, judge of the Book-of-the-Month Club, writes: *"I have been a fan of science fiction all my life, and of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction for all its life. F&SF gives us some of the best writing in the field, and the field is one of great importance."*

HUGO GERNSBACK, pioneer in science fiction publishing, writer and editor, writes: *"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose—is a French truism, lamentably accurate of much of our latter day science fiction. Not so in the cyclotronic Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction which injects sophisticated isotopes, pregnant with imagination, into many of its best narratives."*

ORVILLE PRESCOTT, literary critic and author, Book Review Editor for the *New York Times, writes: "People who think that their literary I.Q. is too high for them to enjoy the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction don't know what they are missing. The number of well-written, ingenious and entertaining stories it regularly publishes is astonishingly high."*

BEN GRAUER, radio and television outstanding special events reporter: *"Science fiction, I think, offers a wonderful education for its readers—it extends their understanding to include the entire cosmos."*

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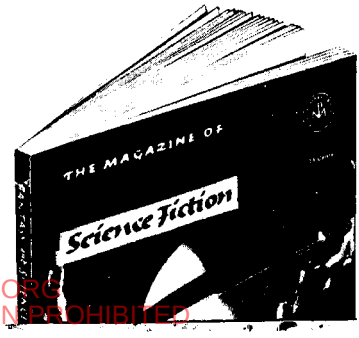

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